There's nothing wrong
with wanting it all.
selfish
BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SHANTEL TESSIER

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Self*ish*

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The course of true love never did run smooth. William Shakespeare

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DEDICATION

To those who believe in happily ever afters and fairy tales, this one is for you.
There’s nothing wrong with wanting it all.

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CHAPTER ONE

RYDER

Sitting in a conference room overlooking downtown Manhattan with fifteen men, I feel my phone vibrate in the pocket of my black slacks. I remove it and stare down at a set of dark brown eyes and glossy lips on the screen of my iPhone. But instead of a smile, they're puckered up as if waiting for me to kiss them. I turn my phone at an angle to enlarge the picture. A naked woman is lying on a set of dark sheets, showing me a few of her best assets. My eyes trail away from her round face and down to her bare chest. A pair of overly large breasts hang nicely as she props herself up on one arm while lying on her stomach. I continue my assault as my gaze roams over her tanned back and then her round ass.

I clear my throat and place it back in my pocket. I go to open my mouth when I feel it buzz again. Sighing, I pull it out once more. Another pic; I open it up, and this time she shows me a full frontal. She's holding the camera above her, showing me a much better view of big breasts. She has her legs slightly spread as she now lies on her back. *At least it's a better pic than the last.*

I send her a quick text.

Me: *I'm in a meeting.*

Leslie: *Are you hard?* she asks, ignoring my message.

I pull my eyes away from my phone to look down at my black dress slacks. Nothing. I've done the woman before. Several times, actually, but it was just sex, and although any guy would like to receive pictures of her, I'm busy at the moment.

The conference door opens, and I drop my phone in my lap as if my parents had just caught me watching porn. Which I kinda was but nobody knows that. Even though I'm an adult, I am still at work! And as far as my father is concerned, *you don't bring your personal life to the workplace*. If he knew I'd had his assistant bent over this exact conference table three weeks ago, my belt around her neck and my hand covering her mouth to quiet her moans and gasps, he'd kill me with his bare hands.

I smirk as *that* person enters the room. She avoids eye contact with me. I guess the wound of not wanting to have a relationship with her is still fresh. She knew exactly what we were doing—fucking and nothing more. "I'm sorry, gentlemen. Mr. O'Kane is going to be a little longer. Is there anything I can get you while you wait?"

The guy beside me, Luke Hahn, who just happens to be the father of the girl I was just looking at naked pictures of, lets out an aggravated huff as he stands from his place at the table. "We've already been waiting thirty minutes." I frown. *Has it been that long?*

"I'm sorry, sir; it won't be much longer," she repeats as she shifts from foot to foot on her solid black heels.

He starts to button his expensive white suit jacket as he speaks. "I have other offers, and I know they would not keep me waiting." *Is that so?*

Jessica starts to nibble on her light pink bottom lip as she rubs the palms of her hands down her black pencil skirt, a nervous habit. In the three months she has worked here, she has never worked well under pressure, and that's why she won't last long. You can see the uncertainty in her brown eyes and confusion on her pale face. She doesn't know what to do. How to make them stay.

My father is an investor of sorts. He owns a Fortune 500 company. And Mr. Hahn here has something my father wants. Hence, the meeting. So for something to be keeping him, it must be very dire.

I stand, deciding to take matters into my own hands. "Mr. Hahn."

His head snaps to the left to face me; black eyes hard and jaw sharp. I place my phone in my front pocket, once again ignoring the pictures his daughter is sending me. "If you would be so kind to enlighten me for a

second.” His graying brows rise. “Just how many offers do you have?” I’m challenging him now; let’s see if he accepts.

“Mr. O’Kane,” my father’s assistant, Jessica, hisses my name, but I ignore her. I outrank her here, and clearly, I don’t care what she has to say.

“Four, to be exact,” he responds sharply, squaring his shoulders.

I look down at my watch to see it’s fifteen till nine. “And you’re meeting with all four today?” I ask for clarification, even though I know he’s bullshitting me. Isn’t there a saying, something about you can’t bullshit a bullshitter? Yeah, he doesn’t wanna go toe to toe with me.

He gives me a curt nod.

“Yet we were your first. Why is that?”

He looks away from me to catch the tail end of Jessica running out of the room; no doubt she’s off to go tell my father that I’m doing his work for him. *You’re welcome!*

He looks back at me but doesn’t answer my question. I motion for him to sit back down. “Please, if you may. Give me ten minutes.” *I’m only gonna need five.*

He looks at the other thirteen men in the room as if seeking their approval to stay or leave. But he and I both know they’re just here to fill the seats. His groupies, as you’d say, to pat him on the back once he signs a piece of himself away. As if their approval will soften the blow to his pride.

His lawyer, the only other one worth being present, stands from his seat. His dark blue eyes remain on me while he speaks to his client. “Mr. Hahn. I advise you…”

Mr. Hahn raises his hand, and he stops immediately. “I wanna hear what the boy has to say.”

I refrain from growling. *Boy?* You won’t think of me as a little boy when I’m done with you. Instead, I give his lawyer a tight smile as he slowly sits back down in his seat. Hahn’s lawyer is here out of formality. No one tries to sell a piece of themselves without a lawyer present. It’s obvious, though, that he doesn’t care what his lawyer has to say and I’m gonna use that to my benefit.

Mr. Hahn’s grandfather had bought a piece of property on Fifth Avenue back in nineteen thirty. It had been handed down through the years, but a little birdie told me that he was on the verge of bankruptcy and would do anything to save it. And by little birdie, I mean his daughter. I had her naked lying on my bed a couple of months ago. After I was done with her, she couldn’t quit talking about her personal life.

He finally sits, as his men make no move to leave. I take a deep breath as my phone vibrates in my pocket. I’m guessing another naked picture.

“Luke. Can I call you Luke?” His daughter prefers to call me *daddy.* Can you see the reason she told me his little secret? Daddy issues all the way.

Before he can respond to my question, I continue. “Let me tell you why you made the right decision by coming to O’Kane Enterprises first.” I simply raise my hands, motioning toward the floor-to-ceiling windows that span the wall of the twelve hundred foot conference room behind him. Those who sit on his side of the black marble conference table all spin around in their swivel chairs to look over the center of downtown Manhattan from the seventieth floor.

He quickly spins back around to face me, his black eyes narrow and his lips thin. “It’s Manhattan. There are thousands of buildings. Are you suggesting I came here for the view?” he demands, sounding offended.

“A little over sixty thousand, to be exact.” Give or take a few. They build so much in this town that it’s hard to keep track. My comment makes him squint even more. *My point is* … “O’Kane Enterprises owns more than fifty-five percent of them.” That is major!

Now, don’t think my father is a genius and he came from nothing and somehow worked his way up to the King of New York. Not quite! Just like the man sitting across from me, my father was also handed down a legacy. A legacy he has turned into an empire in his fifty-two years. I intend to take over that empire and make it my bitch in every way, starting with Luke Hahn. Just like I did with his daughter.

He slaps his hand on the black marble table as he growls. His groupies all jump and gasp for effect, but I refrain from rolling my eyes. I can see where

Leslie got her overly dramatic attitude. “I didn’t come here and wait thirty minutes to be told facts I already know,” he snaps.

My phone vibrates once again, and I groan at the fact his daughter isn’t getting the fucking hint that I’m busy. “Then let’s get down to it.” For both our sakes.

“Let’s!” he hisses, drawing out the word to sound like a snake in the grass about to strike. When, let’s face it, we both know he doesn’t even have any fangs. He’s like a dog with all bark and no bite.

“O’Kane Enterprises is more than happy to offer you a seven-figure sum for your property on Lexon Hill Fifth Avenue.” I walk down to the head of the table where my father would be sitting if he were here and pick up the documents and the pen that has my father’s name scripted on it—*Timothy O’Kane CEO*. Walking around the table, I come to a stop behind him and reach over to place them in front of him. He picks the document up and immediately starts to read it. I make my way back over to my seat and sit down; the leather whines as I lean back, getting comfortable.

“Wait a minute.” He drops it down to the table. “I am not offering the property as a whole. I want to bring in a partner …”

“Investor,” I correct him. “Partner implies you are willing to share your company. An investor implies you can’t do it on your own,” I say matter-of-factly. He isn’t willing to give away controlling interest or shares. He just wants someone to throw him some money. A silent partner, to be exact.

His jaw clenches, and he swallows. “An investor,” he says through gritted teeth, “who can help get the restaurant up and going again.” He takes a deep breath as if that was a hard pill to swallow. His family restaurant, *Hahn*, has been going downhill for the last twenty years ever since he took it over. He has finally reached the point where he has run out of options.

“Luke,” I say, and his jaw sharpens. “Let’s be realistic here.” He goes to open his mouth, but I raise my hand. I lean forward, placing my forearms on the conference table, and lock my fingers together. “You want seven hundred thousand and are only willing to give twenty-five percent of the company. I’ve gone over the PNLs from the last five years, and your loss outweighs the profits by hundreds of thousands.”

“I know what they say. That’s why I’m here,” he snaps.

“The fact that you own the building that sits on the property is a bonus but not a deal maker,” I say honestly.

He looks at his attorney with narrowed eyes, but he stays quiet. Everything I’m saying is true. The numbers don’t lie. And if we take this deal, we will only own twenty-five percent, which would give us no controlling interest. “There are also no liquid assets,” I state, and his eyes snap back to mine.

He puffs out his chest, and his eyes fall down to the documents.

“We are offering you a seven-figure amount,” I add, trying to push him. He goes to speak again, but I continue. “This deal is better than any other deal you will be offered today.” *Especially since they don’t exist.* “With this offer, you can start a new restaurant. And it could be anywhere in the world.” Maybe move away because your daughter is starting to cross the line from hot hookup to *stalker.* Sure, the sex is good, but she’s starting to get clingy. “Or start up a new business entirely.” I see the tables start to turn as he sits there thinking about my words. “Do you really think some new shiny tables and a fresh coat of paint will put your place on the map as a go-to restaurant?” I ask with my arms spread wide and a look of *not hardly* on my face. My father already has a plan for that spot. It will be better than any restaurant Luke could possibly open there. It is prime real estate. It’s not our fault that he ran it into the ground.

He opens his mouth and then closes it. He repeats the motion a couple of times as if a fish out of water. “But it was my grandfather’s …” he trails off softly lost in thought.

His lawyer shoots to his feet. “We’re not here to sell …”

“Sit down!” Mr. Hahn yells at him.

I ignore his lawyer and focus back on Luke. He had mentioned his grandfather … “Speaking of family”—I lick my lips as I lean back in my swivel chair—“how is the wife, Genevieve?” I ask, and he looks up at me with a confused look on his face. “Were you guys able to take that cruise she was talking about at the charity ball last year?” He shakes his head, but I already knew that. The money he had saved for the cruise Genevieve

wanted to take for their fortieth wedding anniversary was spent on the restaurant. Another thing his daughter told me. *For as much as she likes cock in her mouth, she still manages to spill information*.

Just when I think he is going to take the offer, he slams his hand over the papers and looks at me. “I will not sell! I want seven hundred thousand for twenty-five percent. Will you help me or not?”

I shake my head without a second thought. I know my father, and he wouldn’t take it in a million years. My father hasn’t run this billion-dollar company because he’s an idiot.

“Fine!” He looks at his groupies. “We’re done here.” They all rise and start for the door.

I rise slowly as I clasp the single button to my suit jacket. “I ask you to reconsider our offer,” I say calmly.

“Your offer is a disgrace,” he spits out.

I sigh, hating to do this to the man, but I’ve run out of options, and I need to close this deal. “My father is the chairman of the zoning commission,” I say, and they all freeze where they stand. Luke’s hand is on the glass door as he slowly turns his head to look at me.

“And?” He draws out the word.

“And he is submitting to have your property rezoned. Once it’s approved, it’ll eliminate your ability to operate your business on that property any longer.”

ASHLYN

I turn off the hairdryer and set it down on my rather small and cluttered bathroom countertop. The cord catches on a super-size can of hairspray, causing it to hit the tile floor with a clank. “Sorry,” I say softly, looking at my cat who lies on the toilet lid. His big green eyes stare up at me in annoyance as he tries to sleep on the toilet dressed in a t-shirt-like material that says *I’m a badass* across his back. His eyes start to shut as he easily forgives me. He places his head back down to resume his nap.

Leaving the hairspray on the floor, I look at myself in the bathroom mirror and run my hands through my dyed, long blond hair, trying to smooth it out. I really need to get my roots touched up. Thankfully, my hair is a light brown, so it hasn't hit the point where it looks awful; it just annoys me. The steam from my shower still lingers in the bathroom since I have the door closed, and it's causing my hair to kink up. That's what happens when you have naturally curly hair. Reaching over, I turn on my straightener and place it in the sink to heat up while I grab my makeup bag stuffed over in the corner. Shit is spilling over the top; it's so full that a few things also fall to the floor as I hop around, hoping to avoid anything landing on my feet. Once the items have stopped spilling, I leave them on the floor next to the hairspray. I'll get them later. After digging around for what I'm looking for in a bag that seems to be bottomless, I put on a little foundation followed by powder and then some mascara. I stand back and take a good look at myself in my bathroom mirror. My blue eyes are bloodshot from lack of sleep, and the makeup only covered up a little of the dark circles under my eyes. I didn't feel like packing the makeup on today, so I just did enough to make it look like I half care about my appearance. I'm either gonna be spending my day on airplanes or in airports. So no need to look all done up. I apply some nude gloss to my naked lips and then grab my now heated straightener.

Once I finish taming my hair, I walk out of my bathroom and into my adjoining bedroom. Harry lets out a meow as he darts out of my stuffy bathroom and into my dark bedroom as well. It's still early enough in the morning that the sun hasn't come up yet. I tiptoe around my darkened room when I hit my toe on something hard, and a sharp pain runs up my toe and foot. "Shit!" I hiss as I hop on the other foot. With a growl, I reach around until I find the light switch. I flip it on and hiss in another breath from the pain that still lingers. Turning to face my bed, I place my arms over my chest and stare at the man in it. Bradley—naked and still passed out cold. He stumbled in about three o'clock this morning. Three hours ago. Literally. His fist pounding on the door had my eyes springing open and me jumping out of bed. When I opened the front door, he fell right into my apartment. It didn't take long to get his drunk ass to fall asleep; rather, he passed out.

Once he was out, the snoring commenced, and I found myself wide awake and staring up at the ceiling. Fifteen minutes later, I threw on a pair of yoga pants, Nike's, and a hoodie, then I went for an early morning run. When I got back to the apartment, he was in the same spot I had left him. Although the bed looked inviting, I went into the bathroom and jumped in the shower to get ready. My plane leaves at nine fifteen this morning for Panama City, so I didn't have time to lay back down.

I look at him on his back, one hand placed on his large chest. My white comforter is on the floor, but my blue sheet is bunched low on his hips. I can see his other hand under it and centered over his cock. Poor thing thought he was gonna get laid this morning. On any other given night, I would have gone with it, but he had pissed me off. So no love for him.

I roll my eyes as I see my cat, Harry, now sleeping above his head. Harry is a sphynx. The hairless kind that looks like it's an alien. He's about three months old and already his pointy ears are too big for his head, and his dark green eyes are bigger than quarters. His skin is wrinkled like an old man, and his legs are really short; his large belly almost rubs on the floor when he walks.

Bradley snores once again as he breathes deeply, and I narrow my eyes on him. He shouldn't get to enjoy sleep; he sure as hell didn't let me when his drunk ass showed up unannounced. Bending down, I grab his black boot —the same one I just stubbed my toe on—and chunk it towards him. I smile in satisfaction when it hits him square in the chest.

"What the …?" he growls as he sits up quickly, looking around the room aimlessly and I'm sure still drunk. The boot hits the floor with a thud, and Harry hisses as he takes off running for my closet. I just stand there giving Bradley a few seconds to get his bearings. "Ashlyn?" he questions as his heavy brown eyes finally land on me. He rubs them and then blinks a few times. "Did you just hit me?" He rubs his bare chest where the boot made contact. "Or did I dream that?" he mumbles to himself.

"I did it," I respond.

"Why?" He lifts his arm from his chest and starts to scratch his head. It causes his dark hair to stand straight up as if I spent all night running my

hands through it. He then closes his eyes as he yawns.

“Did it hurt?” I ask, ignoring his question.

“Yeah,” he says slowly as he nods his head. “And so does my head.” He leans over placing his head in his hands as he groans.

I smile. “Good.”

His head snaps up, and his bloodshot brown eyes narrow on me. “What the fuck, Ash …?”

“I stubbed my toe on your stupid boot, so I threw it at you. You deserved payback,” I say simply.

His hands drop to his lap, and he looks up at me now, giving me a half-smile. The one he’s known for here in Seattle. “Why don’t you come here, and I’ll kiss it,” he offers, patting the empty space beside him.

I shake my head and turn away from him to walk back to my bathroom, careful not to trip over anything. I’m in the process of moving and also not the cleanest person when it comes to picking my shit up off the floor.

I yelp in surprise when an arm yanks me backwards. Before I can stop him, he has me on my back, pinning me down to my bed while I look up at him. “Let me change your mind,” he whispers as he leans down and runs the tip of his nose along my neck. My body automatically relaxes under the feel of his. I let out a sigh as I run my nails down his back. He grabs my arms and pushes them above my head, linking our fingers together.

Why was I up this early again? Right— “Brad, I can’t …”

His hands tighten around mine, and he leans down farther to whisper in my ear. “I bet if I flip you over and position you with your ass up in the air ...” My body softens even more at that thought. “Take a handful of your hair ...” He releases my hands and wraps both of his hands in my hair, pulling my head back to expose my neck. My lips part and I suck in a deep breath as I lift my hips to his body. “And bury your face in the pillow,” he growls as his now hard cock pushes against my sex over my shorts. “That would change your mind.” He pulls away from my ear and starts to kiss down my neck to my collarbone. My body breaks out in goose bumps, and I lift my hips with need as the thought of him burying himself inside me fills my mind. He chuckles. “See, Ash, you’re ready for me.”

His arrogant comment pulls me out of my trance. I push him back, and thankfully, he doesn't fight me. As soon as he's sitting up and straddling me, I punch him in the chest.

"Ow," he cries as he places his hand over it. "What was that for?" He rubs it gently. "You're very aggressive today." A slow smile spreads across his face. "I like it," he mumbles as his eyes fall on my chest.

I shove him off, and he falls down onto the bed. I stand quickly and stare down at him. My eyes can't help but travel down his flat stomach and then to his hard cock. Bradley is a big guy. Six-foot-two and spends a lot of time in the gym. He has to, though, to work off all the alcohol he consumes on the weekends.

And all those hours at the gym pay off when it comes to stamina. I stare longingly at his cock. It stares back at me as if it's calling to me. We could have a quickie. I mean what is another twenty minutes? I can be a little late. My plane doesn't leave until nine thirty.

"No!" I say out loud.

"No what?" he asks confused. "I backed off."

I shake my head; it's been a few weeks since we've had the chance to hook up, and it's messing with me. I've been busy with college finals, graduation, which was last night, and then the move next week. "No, I won't have sex with you this morning. I'm mad at you," I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

He chuckles as he runs a hand through his hair but asks, "Why? What did I do to piss off the princess?"

I narrow my eyes at him. That's my nickname. He's been calling me that since the night we met three years ago. "One. Your drunk ass woke me up at three o'clock this morning when you started banging on my door." Now, normally that wouldn't bother me. Bradley and I have the best kind of relationship two people can have. Not only are we best friends, but we also sleep together! See what I mean by the best? We give each other what we need with no strings attached.

"I told you yesterday that I was gonna come over after I left Jensen's party," he states. Last night, parties were everywhere due to graduation

celebrations. I didn't feel like going to any since I had to get up early this morning in order to make our flight.

"You did. But I told you not to," I remind him. "I told you I had an early flight out this morning, and I wasn't even done packing." That is another reason my room looks like a tornado tore through it. I have clothes strewn all over the place, and I'm running out of time.

"You don't leave until tomorrow." He waves off my concern.

"I leave today!" I say, stomping my foot. My eyes narrow at him when he smiles at my little tantrum. "I told you that two weeks ago when we changed our flight." Becca, my best girlfriend/roommate, and I decided we were going to Panama City for a little vacation. My parents had some frequent flyer miles and gave them to us for our graduation present. My parents pretty much see Becca as their own. We weren't supposed to leave until tomorrow, but two weeks ago, we decide to change it. *Why not go a day earlier?*

He makes his way to the end of the bed and stands. He takes a step towards me, and I take one back. "Brad, I told you. I don't have time for sex." The man has the power to go for a long time. And I mean that in the best of ways, but I'm running short on time as it is.

"I'm not gonna hump your leg." He chuckles. "I'm just gonna tell you I'm sorry." He pulls me in for a tight hug. "I guess I wasn't listening yesterday, but I am now, and I'm sorry." I hug him back and enjoy the feel of his warm body against mine. The man is my own personal oven. He has come over several times and slept in my bed just so I could cuddle with him. I sigh; it's nice to have a friend like him. One you can tell all your secrets to and one you can lie in bed with. Naked. The man knows exactly what I like in and out of the bedroom, but that is as far as our friendship goes. And we are both very content with that. I could never actually date the guy. I know way too much about him. And he knows way too much about me.

I pull away and gesture to his dick, which is still hard. "Put some clothes on."

He walks to my bathroom with a smug smile on his face as I start to grab his clothes off my floor. I hear the water in my sink start running, and he speaks. “Did we have sex last night?”

“No! You were not capable of sex. Plus, you would have remembered that,” I state.

I hear a muffled chuckle come from my bathroom. He must be brushing his teeth with my toothbrush. We literally share everything, even plaque. “True …” He pauses as I hear him spit. “But why am I naked?” he asks as he’s coming back out of my bathroom and plopping down on the side of the bed. “Did you try to get me in the mood?” He arches his eyebrow in question. “Was it whiskey dick? I hate when that bastard shows up.” He sighs.

I can’t help but laugh. “No. I guess you planned to get lucky, but you passed out as soon as your clothes were off. You barely made it to the bed,” I say, throwing his boxers and shirt at him. He catches them as they hit his chest. I then start picking up a few pairs of my shorts that I need to throw in my bag.

“You call this a bed?” he asks with a frown. And to be completely honest, it’s not. All I have is a metal bedframe and mattress. In two weeks, Becca and I are moving to New York to start our post-graduation life—where we get jobs and become adults, or so I’ve been told. She and I have spent the last month selling most of our stuff because the cost to move it was more than I wanted to pay. Plus, our new apartment in New York is fully furnished anyway. Which is a bonus, since it’s not like college kids have much to begin with.

“I could have left your ass in the hallway,” I say with a shrug.

He laughs as he runs his hand through his hair. I bend down and start to throw more clothes into a bag when my room becomes quiet.

“Ashlyn?” He breaks the silence after a few seconds.

I look up at him and smile. “Yes?”

“Thanks for taking care of me,” he says seriously.

I snort. “All I did was make sure you made it to the bed. The rest was all you.”

“What am I gonna do after you move?” he asks, looking up at me with those dark brown eyes. And he almost looks genuinely sad, but I know he’s not. He’ll miss me, yes, but he’ll be fine.

I toss his other boot from the floor over to the bed. “You’ll find someone to screw.” I tease.

He smiles up at me before placing the shirt up and over his head. “Well, yeah. But they won’t be as dirty as you allow me to be.”

I roll my eyes but agree with him. “Well, stop going for girls and find yourself a real woman.” I offer.

He laughs as he stands to pull his boxers on. “The real ones want to talk, and I have nothing to say.” He says truthfully. His boxers don’t do anything to hide the bulge behind them.

I go to speak, but the door to my room opens. Brad spins around, and I look up as the door hits the interior wall to see my roommate’s boyfriend standing in my doorway. Instead of turning around and leaving like a gentleman, he leans his shoulder up against the doorframe, crosses his arms over his chest, and smiles at us. “Well, don’t stop on my account. Please, carry on.” Of course, he thinks we just finished having sex. Brad is only half dressed, and so am I.

He looks me up and down, taking in my tank top and short shorts. I just threw them on after my shower. I have no bra or underwear on.

“Get out!” Brad orders, pointing at Conner.

“I didn’t expect you to be the private type, Bradley,” he muses. “Lord knows I’ve heard you guys fuck plenty of times. I sure would love a glimpse of what makes the ice queen melt.” He winks at me, and I pull my lips back in disgust. I hate how thin the walls are in our apartment, but I’ve never been one to be quiet in bed. And as much as I dislike Conner, I’m sure as hell not gonna tone down my sex life to accommodate him.

Brad lets out a growl and then takes off towards my door. For once in his miserable life, Conner actually looks scared. He pulls back from the doorframe, wide-eyed and fists raised as if he’s gonna fight Brad. I smile in satisfaction. Finally, someone is gonna put him in his freaking place. My

excitement fades and I feel nothing but disappointment when Brad just slams the door in his face.

He spins around and fists his hands down by his sides. “I hate that guy,” he snaps.

“Don’t we all?” I mumble, spinning around and walking into my closet. I grab the hem of my tank top pulling it up and over my head. I toss it into the dirty clothes basket to my right and then grab my bra that’s hanging on a hook by my clothes rack. “That guy is a total douche. I don’t understand why Becca is with him!” I huff. My roommate is the sweetest and most caring person I have ever met. We were once on our way to class, and she made me stop in the middle of a packed intersection so she could get out of my car and help a turtle cross the street. She did it with a smile on her face while I flipped off the cars that honked and yelled at us to move. That’s just one of the many things she has done since I met her four years ago. She offers to work on holidays so others can take off and see their families. She stops at McDonald’s for breakfast and always orders more just in case she sees a homeless man or woman on the side of the road. She is exactly what this world needs. But it makes me sick to see people take advantage of her, which is exactly what that douchebag is doing!

Once I fasten my bra, I push my shorts down my legs. I’m still thinking about how much I hate Conner when two hands stop me. I look up to see Brad standing in front of me with a small smile tugging at his lips. “Oh, no,” I say, trying to back away from him, but his hands on my bare hips stop me. “I said I don’t have time …”

His lips come down on mine, stopping whatever protest I had. His tongue pushes its way past my lips, and I melt in his arms as I allow him to kiss me deeply. The taste of the mint toothpaste fills my mouth, and he swallows my moan as I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him closer to me. His still hard cock presses into my lower stomach, and I hate that I told him to put those boxers on now that I no longer have shorts on. I need him. It’s been three weeks since we last had sex. He could take me right here in the closet, for all I care.

A fist pounds on my bedroom door, which causes me to pull away, breathing heavy and my heart pounding. Bradley grips me tightly, shielding me in case Conner's about to walk in again. "We're leaving in ten," I hear Becca's soft voice call from the other side.

I sigh heavily as I look up at Brad's big brown eyes. I lift my right hand and gently rub my lip-gloss off his lips from our kiss. "Can't blame a man for trying," he says softly.

I smile as I slap him on the chest playfully. He was about to succeed. "Stop it!"

"Seriously," he says as he looks down at me. His dark eyes linger between my thighs, and my pussy tightens. "Anyone who wouldn't try isn't a man." His fingertips run over the top of my breasts that I just crammed into my bra. Then he trails a finger lower over my stomach. I take a deep breath as he runs it down over my belly button. Disappointment floods me when he takes his hands off me and steps back. At least one of us is being responsible now, and it sure as hell isn't me. I can only say no so many times before I just jump him myself.

Placing his hands on my hips again, he spins me around. One arm wraps around my waist while the other comes up and wraps around my neck. I arch my back and suck in a deep breath before he cuts off my air. Closing my eyes, now wishing he wouldn't have been so drunk last night. He lowers his lips down to my ear. "You're mine when you get back." He then releases me, and I yelp when he slaps my ass hard. The sound bounces off the walls in my rather small closet.

I spin around, totally turned on and wet because I know exactly what he means by *mine*. I smile up at him sweetly even though my heart is pounding and I'm wet as fuck. "Better be ready." I gently smack his hard cock as I walk past him.

"Fuck," he hisses, bending over and holding himself.

I laugh as I go to one of many suitcases and pull out a pair of panties, and then I run back to my closet for a pair of yoga pants. I'm dressing comfy if I have to be on a plane all day.

"God, I'm dreading this trip," I say as I blow the hair out of my face.

“Why?” he asks as he puts on his jeans. “You’re gonna be sitting on a beach drinking margaritas like crazy. What’s not to love?”

“Conner,” I say simply.

“Don’t let him get to you. You have five whole days without him.” He looks up at me on the side of the bed and smiles.

I sigh heavily. That was the original plan. But remember when I said that Becca has a heart the size of Texas? “She invited him. He’s going to be sitting on that beach with me.” I state with dread.

“What the fuck?”

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CHAPTER TWO

RYDER

“What did you say?” Luke growls as he lets go of the glass door and turns to fully face me. Shoulders pulled back and chest puffed up.

“He can’t—”

I look down at my watch as if I have somewhere else to be. “He can,” I interrupt his lawyer with an annoyed sigh. “You will be notified within days,” I tell him.

“You little shit!” Luke hisses stalking towards me. “You think you can blackmail me?” His voice roars with anger.

“I’m not blackmailing you, Luke. I’m giving you a reason to take the very generous deal we offered you. That’s all.”

He comes to stand before me, his face inches from mine even though I tower over him. I look down at him, trying not to roll my eyes. I get it. I’ve cornered him, and he doesn’t like it. But he alone is the reason he’s in this position. He can only blame himself. “And between you and me,” I say, lowering my voice, “we both know that those other offers are non-existent. So”—I lean over and pick up the papers off the table and hold them out to him—“take the deal, Luke. Take the money and start over.”

“I’m so sorry I’m late!” my father declares five minutes later, as he bursts through the glass conference door with his assistant, Jessica, hot on his tail. I smile at her, and she adjusts her black-rimmed glasses as she turns her nose up in the air.

“O’Kane,” Luke says his name with hatred.

“Mr. Hahn. If you could just allow me five minutes of your time …”

“No need,” he says, interrupting him. “You know you’ve done well with him,” he says, eyeing me with disgust. It was an insult, but I take it as a compliment.

“I’m glad someone can appreciate me around here.” I give a pointed look at my father.

“We’ll be going,” Luke announces to the room before tossing the now signed papers onto the conference table. They slide across the black marble and come to a stop right before they fall off the side.

He pins me with an evil glare before spinning around and walking towards the door, and his lawyer makes sure to throw me a *screw you* look.

My father turns to me, wearing his own pissed-off look. The one I used to always get as a kid when I disobeyed him. His dark green eyes narrow, and his lips purse. “Ryder,” he growls, calling me by my middle name. The only name I answer to these days. “What the hell just happened?” he demands.

You have to know one thing about my father. This business is his life. His favorite child! He loves my sister, Becca, and me, but his business never lets him down. It’s made him enough money to buy anything he freaking wants. It has made him a God. And that is more precious than any living soul to him.

I reach over, gather the papers from the table, and slap them to his chest. “What I was thinking was that I have a plane to catch in a couple of hours, and there was a deal to close. You’re welcome.” He reaches up and grabs the papers before they fall to the floor. “Oh and, Dad, sometimes mixing work with pleasure does benefit you.” *In more ways than one.* I walk past him and wink at Jessica. She stands there staring at me with a look of hatred, but it turns to heat when I watch her eyes drop to my slacks.

I make my way down the long hallway, passing an office here and there before I come to a waiting area. My assistant sits behind her desk on the phone. She doesn’t even bother to look up at me as I walk past her and into my office.

“Ryder.” No surprise my father followed me, slamming my door shut behind him.

“By all means,” I say, plopping down in my office chair. The windows behind me that showcase Manhattan have the morning sun shining on his face, making his green eyes look brighter than normal.

He squints as he lets out a huff. He comes to a stop and stands in front of my desk. One hand in the pocket of his dark gray slacks while the other hand still holds the signed contract. “How did you know he was on the verge of bankruptcy?” he demands.

“Does it matter?” I ask carelessly.

“Goddammit, Ryder. Answer the fucking question!” He snaps.

I sit back in my seat as I look him in the eyes. My sister and I both got our dark green eyes from him. Our mother’s eyes are a purpleish blue. “I’ve been hooking up with his daughter for almost a year. A few months ago over a bottle of wine, she told me he was nearing bankruptcy and needed help with the restaurant.”

He shakes his head confused. “You …” He pauses and runs his hand through a full head of dark hair. For as hard as he works and stresses, my father still looks very young for his age. I guess he can thank my mother for that; she’s into all of those oils and all that facial shit. She’s obsessed with appearances as much as my father is with his career. But he draws the line at any medical procedure. My mother, on the other hand, has no limits when it comes to staying young. “You told me you heard word of it on the streets.”

“On the streets. In my bed. It doesn’t matter, Dad.”

He stands there for a few more seconds before he spins around and walks to my office door. No, *thank you*, *Ryder, you did a fabulous job*. Does he even know how hard I worked to get that information? He goes to open my door but stops and looks back at me. “I have to go to Paris.”

“What? When?”

“Now! That’s why I was late to the Hahn meeting. William couldn’t get the deal signed, and I need to go and do it myself. Have a safe and happy birthday in Panama City.” I nod. Naked chicks. Alcohol. My sister. What’s not to love? “Oh and Ryder?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Take care of your sister. There are some perverted fucks out there.” Then he exits just the way he came in—pissy and in a hurry. His normal self.

I reach over and press the button for my assistant. “Yes, Mr. O’Kane?”

“Can you call Milton and tell him I’ll be ready in ten? Please!”

“Yes, Sir.” She answers happily.

I’m checking last-minute emails on my computer when my door opens. “What’s up, man?” I ask as my best friend enters my office.

He walks in as if he owns the place. His flower-patterned shirt and holey jeans have me raising my eyebrows in question. I don’t have time for him to go through a mid-life crisis at the age of twenty-nine. “Hey, man, we gotta go,” he declares as he checks his silver Rolex watch. I hate to tell him his careless attire doesn’t match the twenty thousand dollars he’s wearing on his wrist. “We should have been on the road fifteen minutes ago. You know New York traffic is a bitch.”

“I know. I know.” I say, closing everything out. I can’t help but yawn. God, I’m tired.

“How was California?” He asks.

“It went well.” I literally just arrived back from my business trip at three o’clock this morning. I had to miss my sister’s college graduation yesterday because I had business in California. My father was scheduled to go, but my mother got mad and told him work did not trump his only daughter’s college graduation, so I volunteered to go for him. He wasn’t for it, but what choice did he have? My mother would have killed him, and he really did want to be there for Becca. There’s not much my mother cares about, but for appearances sake she would not allow him to miss a photo op. So instead, I went to California for two days and watched my sister walk across the stage while my father FaceTimed me. It wasn’t what I had planned, but at least, I got to watch her walk.

I landed this morning on our private jet and was going to go home and get some rest until I needed to be at the airport, but then I remembered this meeting my father had this morning and I couldn’t miss it.

Jaycent taps his foot and looks at his watch again. “Dude …”

“I had a meeting run late,” I inform him, gathering up my things. “Why are you dressed like that?” I ask, truly concerned for him. He’s been my friend my entire life, and I’ve never seen him dress in anything with floral

designs on it. “Your shirt looks like you’re wearing wallpaper and your pants look like you lost a fight with a pair of scissors.”

“What?” He asks, looking down at his shirt and running his hand down the front of the fabric. *Is that silk?* “We’re going on vacation. I wanted to dress the part.” He says with a smile.

“Well, as your best friend, I feel that I must tell you... You look stupid!” He doesn’t get to go on a vacation very often.

He waves it off. “Quit worrying about how I choose to dress and let’s get out of here! We’ve got alcohol and ladies waiting for us on a beach.” He rubs his hands together excitedly. “And someone is having a birthday tomorrow.”

I smile at that. We’ve been planning this trip for two weeks now. I got a call from my little sister a couple of months ago, and she wanted to come home to New York to see me on my birthday. But at the time, I had been scheduled to be in Paris for business. My father ended up sending William instead. Too bad William couldn’t get it done. I would have.

I spoke to Becca the following week, and she told me that she and her friend were going to take a small vacation to Panama City since I was gonna be out of town. I haven’t seen her much since I graduated high school and went off to college eleven years ago. But that’s to be expected when one of us lives in Seattle and the other in New York.

I started to think about the last vacation I took, but it had been so long, I couldn’t even remember. I just work. And work some more. This job is my life. I’ve become my dad, just without the wife and children at home. I’m fine with that. One day I will run this company, but I want my father to know that it won’t be just because my last name is O’Kane.

“Come on! Let’s go!” I say, standing from my chair. I can’t wait to see

Becca. She’s been going through a hard time lately, and I hate how much we don’t talk anymore. But this is also why I never told her I was gonna meet her in Panama City. I never told her that I didn’t go to Paris. She knows how busy my schedule is, and at times, I’m only home for one day out of a week. I’m constantly flying here or going there. I wanted my trip to Florida to be a complete surprise.

I know it’s different for a brother and sister to be close, but we always were growing up. We may be seven years apart, but I’m her big brother, after all. She needs someone to look after her. I’m all she’s got; my father sure as hell isn’t gonna be there for her, and my mother is too wrapped up in herself to stop and worry about her unless the situation will benefit her.

We walk out of my office, and I make my way over to my assistant’s desk. “Kelly?”

She looks up at me from her computer and smiles. Her bleach blond hair is pulled up into a tight and perfected bun. Her red lipstick which I swear has stained her lips that color, is perfect as usual. Her dark blue eyes look from me over to Jaycent for a quick moment, and her cheeks turn as red as her lips before her eyes dart back to me. They have something going on. Only an idiot would miss it.

“What can I do for you, Mr. O’Kane?” she asks sweetly as she places her forearms on her desk.

“Has my father already left for Paris?” I ask her, going through the mail that sits in the wire basket on her desk.

“Yes. The helicopter has left to take him to the airport. Are you out as well?” New York traffic can be a bitch, and he has no patience for such nonsense. Or so he would say.

I nod, answering her previous question. “I won’t be back until Monday. Forward all calls to my cell.”

She smiles cheerfully. “Will do, sir.”

I walk away from her desk and over to the stainless steel elevator doors, the heels of my shoes clapping on the white tile floor. I look over at Jaycent standing next to me, but he’s still looking over his shoulder at Kelly. “Can you be any more obvious?” I whisper. I can see why he wants to stare at her. She is a replica of Barbie—the hair, the shape of her body, and even her eyes—if you’re into that kind of woman. When I was interviewing for an assistant and she walked in, my first thought was fuck her working for me. I’ll do her right here and now and then send her on her merry way. But the big rock on her left finger stopped me from voicing that idea. And by the time the interview was done, I realized she would be much more reliable to

me as an assistant than a quickie. But in the three years she has worked for me, her fiancé broke her heart. And now, Jaycent wants to be her rebound.

He turns his head to look at me, his light brown eyes full of mischief. “I still don’t know how you haven’t hit that.” He states, whispering in awe.

After her fiancé had dumped her the thought had crossed my mind, but then realized I didn’t want to lose her as an assistant. So the answer was easy! “Haven’t you heard of the saying *don’t bite the hand that feeds you*?” She’s never even tried to make a pass at me, and I didn’t want to make her feel uncomfortable.

“Haven’t you heard of work perks?” He questions as the doors glide open. “You slept with your father’s assistant.” He reminds me.

“Yes, I remember. It was just weeks ago. But she is also not *my* employee. Yet.” I add. Once I take over, I’ll let her go. Kelly will always be my assistant. But I doubt Jessica makes it that long.

Entering the elevator I press the button for the lobby. As the doors slide close, I add. “And I’m sure as hell not gonna dip where you’ve been.”

He turns to face me with a shocked look on his face. “I have not slept with her!” He announces as if that was offensive.

Bingo! That’s exactly what I wanted to know. “Yet!” I push the subject.

He shrugs as he turns to face the doors. “We’ve had dinner once, but that’s it.”

“Wow!” I say impressed. “You were able to eat a meal with a female and keep your dick in your pants.” I add with a smile.

“Baby steps.” He replies.

“Gotta crawl before you can walk.” I smirk.

“I’d crawl anywhere for a piece of her.” He says in an awe-like voice.

“Down boy,” I order, laughing. “I’ll make sure to buy you a walking leash for Christmas.” I tease.

“Make sure it’s a studded one,” he says with a big smile. “Those are my favorite.”

I laugh and then change the subject. “I gotta run by my apartment first.”

As the elevatror comes to a stop he asks, “Why? Have you not packed yet?”

“No.” I admit.

“Are you serious?” He sighs heavily as we walk through the lobby. I wave and say goodbye to Mason, the security guard who works the front desk.

I push the glass front door open and step out into noisy Manhattan. I love it here. The hustle. The traffic. The noise. It’s my home and I can’t imagine living anywhere else. “I was a little busy last night.”

“How did you have time to hook up with someone? You didn’t get back from California until like four this morning,”

I lift my finger in the air. “It was three. And I take offense to that. I have a life besides work.” I roll my eyes.

He snorts. “Whatever you wanna tell yourself.” He also knows I’m lying. “Why don’t you just grab the bag you have packed from California? I know you haven’t unpacked it yet.”

“It was business. All I took with me were two suits. I have to pack a new one.” I explain.

We walk up to the black Cadillac Escalade that is parked curbside. People walk past us on the sidewalk while taxis and other vehicles fill the busy streets.

“Hello, Sir.” My driver says opening the door for me.

“Hello, Milton.” I get into the backseat of the SUV and Jaycent follows behind. “How did you get here?” I ask, looking over at him.

“I had a car drop me off. I called you a few times and then decided to just come up here and drag you out of the office if need be.”

I nod my head in understanding. “Yeah, my phone is on vibrate …” As I trail off he frowns. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, there are three missed calls from Jaycent, along with several text messages from Hahn’s daughter. I sigh, ignoring them and place my phone back in my pocket.

ASHLYN

“November Rain” by the amazing Guns N’ Roses blares in my ears while I sit in my cramped little seat. While on our first plane for the day as we fly

over … well, I don’t know where we are flying over at the moment.

I have the tray table in front of me down and a book propped up on it as I read one of the greatest love stories ever told. *Romeo and Juliet*! I find it amazing! These days you don’t find people fighting for what they believe in anymore. They just whine and bitch about how it should be, in their opinion, but they don’t actually fight for it. For love. They would rather give up and call it quits. People have this mentality that shit should just be given to them. If they actually have to work for it, they walk away.

Romeo and Juliet fight till the end. And what an end it is. Have you ever loved someone so much that you couldn’t see yourself living, knowing that they are dead? I haven’t. You hear couples say it all the time. *When I die, I want you to move on, be happy. Find someone else to live the rest of your days out with.* Screw that! If you love someone that much, how can you even imagine them being with someone else? Call me selfish, but that is how I imagine I would feel if I ever fall in love. But that raises another question. Does that kind of love even exist? That soul-crushing, heart-ripping agony? I’m not sure. People fall in and out of love daily it seems. It’s pathetic.

I let out a cuss word when douchebag shoves his elbow into my side and then pulls out my right earbud. “What?” I demand as I turn to look over at Conner. Somehow, he got the middle seat and Becca got the window seat. Leaving me with the aisle. And it wouldn’t be so bad if the guy with the wandering eyes across the aisle, would stop staring at me while he licks the salt off his peanuts. It’s disturbing and hard to ignore. I take a quick look noticing Becca is sleeping as her head rests on the window, the shade down.

“How do you listen to music and read at the same time?” Conner asks in wonder.

I snort. “I can multitask. You should know how that works, considering you can juggle three women at a time.” Becca has to know how he truly is. She has to see how he stares at the other women on campus and how when they break up for a week, he goes and hooks up with several of them. I swear she took Conner on as a project. She wants to save him, but I hate to

tell her it’s too late. He falls in that category where they think shit should be given to them—the entitled. And for Conner, that includes women.

He looks offended at first and then a sly smile spreads across his face that makes him look like the Cheshire Cat. “Wanna be a fourth?” His deep voice has dropped to a seductive tone. The one I’ve heard him use on her all the time. It makes me want to puke.

His question should surprise me. Instead, I just respond with, “No, thanks. As you’ve heard, Brad takes care of all my needs.” Without another word I place my earbud back, looking down at my book. The douche reaches over and closes it on me. I try to hide my laughter at his immaturity, but a snort comes out instead. I pick up the book and put my tray table up. We should be landing soon for our first layover on our way to Florida. I bend over to grab my backpack from under the seat in front of me and put the book away. I’ll save it for later this evening when I’m alone in my room. Putting it away, I notice a package of Double Bubble in my backpack. Smiling as I reach in and open it up before popping a piece in my mouth. Smacking my gum as loudly as possible, I turn up the volume on my phone. He wants to be a dick. I can be an even bigger bitch! Some heavy metal band blasts in my ears while chewing the gum like an overcooked piece of steak while popping bubbles the size of soda cans.

I look over at him; his almost black eyes narrow on mine and his jaw is tight. “Did you want a piece?” I ask. It must have been loud because he takes a quick look around the packed plane. He goes to open his mouth, but I speak before he can. “Sorry, this was my last one.” I return to my smacking and try not to choke on it as I hold in my laughter. The douche needs to date a woman like me in this world; he wouldn’t survive more than a week.

I once dated this guy who was like him. I honestly didn’t care that he slept with other women ‘cause we weren’t exclusive, but I don’t care who you’re sleeping with, you still treat me with respect. He didn’t so I taught him a lesson.

“Happy birthday.” I say, pulling him behind me.

“Where are we going?” He asks with the blindfold around his eyes. Couldn’t chance him seeing all the cars parked outside on my street.

“Almost there. Promise.” I say, trying to hold my laughter.

He stumbles behind me and says a few choice words as he trips over rocks and a lawn chair. I bring him to a stop and yank off the blindfold. He blinks a couple of times and looks around my backyard. “We’re in your backyard.” He states the obvious with a tad of disappointment.

I nod. “My parents are out of town. Thought we would go for a late night swim,” I say with a naughty smile. I know he can’t resist it.

Smiling he grabs my face and kisses it. “You’re the best.”

Liar! But I roll with it. “Just wait till you see your next surprise.”

“There’s more?” He asks, his face lighting up.

I nod. “Come on.” I reach down and lift my shirt up and over my head, leaving me in a nude-colored bra. He has his shoes, shorts, and boxers off before I can undo my shorts. Lastly, he rmoves his shirt and jumps in, splashing water all over the place.

I smile as I reach down and grab all his clothes. I turn and start to walk away. “Where are you going? I thought you had another surprise for me?” He laughs.

“Oh, I do.” The lights to the house and backyard come on, lighting it so bright that he has to squint.

“SURPRISE!” Fifty people yell all at once as some of them come out the back sliding glass door. Some are hanging over the balcony on the second floor outside of my bedroom. Some even come through the side gate into the backyard. Gotta love social media.

“What? What the …?”

“Happy birthday, baby,” I say, blowing him a kiss.

“What the fuck, Ash? What are you doing?” He demands, standing in the shallow end.

I take a deep breath and sigh feeling satisfied. “Smell that, Dave? That’s karma. And it smells delicious.” That will teach him to tape us having sex behind my back. A friend of mine told me that she overheard her boyfriend talking about the tape. Apparently, he only showed it to three of his friends.

Although I'm thankful it wasn't the entire school, I had to do something to pay him back. And now, I have his phone in the pocket of his shorts. The electronic device that contains the recording. I win!

Everyone is pointing and laughing at him. He bends down into the water, making his way to the deep end. "It's cold." He says defensively.

"No. It's just small." I say entering the house, heading straight for the garage. I'm about to take a hammer to this phone. Now, that is a scene I don't mind being recorded.

Yeah, Conner wouldn't last a week.

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CHAPTER THREE

RYDER

“Leslie,” I say in a high-pitch tone caught by surprise. “What are you doing here?” I shut the door to my high-rise apartment and Jaycent passes the half-dressed woman sitting on my kitchen table to walk to the living room. Giving us privacy.

“What do you mean what am I doing here?” She sticks out her bottom lip. “I’ve been waiting for you.”

“How in the hell did you get in?” I live at the Q’s. It’s an upscale apartment building in downtown Manhattan. These apartments go for millions of dollars. When you purchase one they give you a key card that unlocks your door, but it also has to be scanned for the elevator to even move. And I sure as hell didn’t give her one. My mother doesn’t even have one. I don’t like surprises, especially unannounced visitors.

“I told the doorman that I was meeting you here and that you had told me to go on up.”

“Why would you do that?” I demand.

She frowns. “Baby, I wanted to surprise you for your birthday. I didn’t think you would mind.”

I look down at my watch and sigh. I don’t have time for this. We still have to run by Jaycent’s apartment to grab his bag. At least, he is already packed, but he’s also on the other side of the city. Good thing it’s on our way to the airport.

I storm off toward my room as I explain to her that I’m not staying long because I have a plane to catch.

“I could come with you.” She doesn’t even know where I’m going.

Now, let me tell you what I love most about women: the way they smell is number one. The way they touch you is an easy second. I even love the

way they go on and on about things that don't even matter. But the thing that turns me off—the one thing that drives me nuts—is someone who is clingy. A woman who acts like she has to have a man by her side in order to feel complete. I mean this is the twenty-first century. Don't they know that their worth is more than the man they want to follow around like a little lap dog? I like a woman who can take charge. One who knows what she wants and works hard to get it. And none of those statements has to do with sex. What I like in the bedroom is a totally different ballgame. But these days, the women I know can't seem to differentiate between being submissive in the bed and being submissive to men in general everyday life.

My father is a billionaire. My sister and I attended Le`man Manhattan. One of the country's most prestigious schools, it has two different campuses that house students from more than fifty different countries. Once I turned twelve, my mother started trying to marry me off to one of her friend's daughters who attended school with me. I'm pretty sure if my father would have allowed it, she would have had me in an arranged marriage.

My mother still calls me all the time to ask if I have found *the one*. And every time I tell her no, I hear the disappointment in her voice when she reminds me that Vicki is still available.

Trust me when I say she's not the one I want. She falls in that category of women who have no drive. Her father is wealthy just like mine is, and like my mother, she has no career or desire to better herself. If I ever do settle down, I want someone with drive and ambition. Which is someone who is willing to do more than lie on their back and spread their legs. I mean, yeah, that can be fun for a one-night stand or something to play with for a while, but what happens after that? I want a woman who is as goal oriented as I am. I want a woman who can stand in a crowded boardroom and make a statement that says *hey, I know I have tits and an ass, but you're going to give me all your attention because I fucking deserve to be here!*

"Ryder …?" Leslie whines once more as I yank things out of my dresser drawers. I toss them onto the bed and walk into my bathroom as I hear Leslie follow me. "Please."

“No!” I finally snap, grabbing my bathroom bag still packed and sitting on my bathroom counter from my trip to California. I pick up my toothbrush that sits beside it from this morning and toss it in. I take a quick look at myself in the mirror and frown when I see the scruff on my face. I haven’t shaved in a few days. My chest can’t grow a single hair, but if I don’t shave my face for one day, I’m a gorilla. But it’ll have to wait because I don’t have the time.

“Why not?” She says as I turn and go back into my bedroom. I sigh heavily as I place my hands on her shoulders to gently move her out of my way. She’s not only begging, but she’s also crowding me. Every time I turn around, she’s right there. “It’ll be fun.” She says in that high-pitch woman voice.

“We’re taking a guys’ trip.” I tell her. She doesn’t know that I’m going away to see my sister and I’d like to keep it that way. The girls like Leslie—the one standing in my bedroom with a teddy on who grew up like my sister and I—were handed everything. Even when her father, Luke Hahn’s, business was circling the drain he still did everything he could to maintain her standard of life. So when they don’t get what they want, they cry about it, and that drives me crazy. When will they understand that I’m not their daddy and I couldn’t care less how much they beg? Unless it’s for my cock, of course, then by all means . . .

“Well, I can be one of the guys,” she says, pushing out her bottom lip that I know she gets injected every five months. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not dogging it. They still suck my cock pretty damn well; they just don’t have any other effect on me unless she’s on her knees.

“Not with these, you can’t.” I grab her overly large breast implants that are poking out the top of her nightie and she hisses in a breath as if the single touch alone has her wanting to come. Which is a lie—I know how hard I have to work in order to get her off.

I look across the room and realize all this pictures she sent were taken while lying on my bed. “How long have you had this planned?” She asks, placing her hands on her hips.

“It was a last-minute decision.” I lie to her.

“What about your birthday? Did you forget that it’s tomorrow?” She asks as she walks up to the platform that surrounds my king-size bed and plops down.

“No. I’m well aware.” How can I forget when everyone keeps reminding me? They all seem to think that twenty-nine is some magic number.

She rolls over onto her back and looks up at me. “I was gonna stay the night and then fix you a birthday breakfast. One you could eat off me.” She says softly as her pink lips widen into a naughty smile.

“Can I take a rain check?” I ask. “We can celebrate it next weekend if you want.” I’ll cancel, but at least it will pacify her for now.

She jumps up onto her knees and nods her head quickly. “Whatever you want.”

I hear her phone ring and walk towards my closet while she answers the call. Yanking some t-shirts off the hangers and then stuffing some jeans in the bag as well. I finish packing the bag quickly.

I undo my black slacks and shove them down my legs before placing a pair of blue jeans on. My fly hangs open as I turn around to grab a shirt when I see her standing at the entry of my closet. Her arms folded over her chest, I see tears start to glisten in her eyes. Not the soft, *you’ve-broken-my-heart* tears, but the kind that holds hatred.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, taking a step toward her but she holds up a hand to stop me.

“What’s wrong?” She yells. “What’s wrong is my father just called me.”

“Leslie …”

“Don’t you Leslie me, you son of a bitch!” She screams.

Dramatic much? “I can explain …”

“You bought my father’s restaurant. What is there to explain?” She cries. “I told you that in confidence, Ryder!”

“It’s just business,” I say with a shrug. “Your father just became a millionaire.” I guess he didn’t tell her how much he made from the deal.

“And you’re just a fucking prick!” She screams and slams my closet door shut. Then the lights go out, leaving it pitch black.

“That’s real mature.” I sigh heavily. I make my way to the door, open it up and storm after her to the front door. Jaycent watches from the couch in amusement as he tries to hide his smile. He fails miserably.

“I was an idiot to even get involved with you.” She sniffs as she yanks her purse off my kitchen table.

Involved? That sounds more like a commitment. I run a hand through my hair before I speak. “You told me how much it was bringing your family down. You told me he wanted out. That it was ruining their marriage. What is so bad about making him an offer he couldn’t refuse?”

“You blackmailed him.”

I roll my eyes. “I did not. It was strictly business. The money …”

“That’s what’s wrong with all of you.” She looks from me to Jaycent and then back at me. “All you care about is what you can buy. Nothing to you holds value.” She hastily puts a long jacket on to cover herself up.

I should say *I’m sorry*. I should say *hey, have your dad call me. We can make a new deal where we won’t bulldoze his restaurant and turn it into a luxury hotel.* But I don’t apologize. Especially for something that will make me money. Instead, I say something that matches her assumption of me. “Does this mean I can’t cash in my rain check breakfast next weekend?”

She bares her teeth at me, letting out a growl right before she slams the front door.

ASHLYN

Have you ever realized just how relaxing the beach is? How your once tense muscles just relax and all those pesky responsibilities that your mind keeps reminding you of just melt away? Is it the fresh ocean air? The sound of the waves hitting the shore? The way your feet sink into the sand? I don’t know which one does it for me, but it’s extremely therapeutic.

I’ve lived in Seattle all my life and although it’s surrounded by water and ferry boats, it’s nothing like Panama City.

“I wanna move here!” Becca sighs heavily as she looks longingly at the blue water rolling in. We haven’t been here for more than three hours and

already, this feels like home. Like this is where I belong.

“Let’s do it!” I say without thought.

She looks over at me with a smile on her face; the soft wind blows her light brown hair around. “You make it sound so easy.” She turns to face the ocean once again as we sit in the sand. I have no problem ignoring the drunk idiots stumbling around and laughing. “You know our lives will never bring us to Florida. Not permanently anyway.” She says with sadness.

I shrug as I watch a young couple making out as they stand waist deep in the ocean. The sun is starting to set in the background. “Who says we have to move to Florida? We can go anywhere now that graduation is over.” I rub my palms together with excitement. The couple out in the waves gets my attention as she jumps up and wraps her legs around his waist. He then pulls her head back by her wet hair and deepens the kiss. I watch longingly as I wish that were me. I sure could use some ocean sex. I’ve never done that before.

“And New York?” She asks, getting my attention. I go to open my mouth to tell her plans can change, but before I can answer she shakes her head. She continues to just stare straight ahead at the waves or maybe she is gazing at the couple who is about to go all the way and doesn’t care who is watching them. “Besides, Conner hates the ocean,” she states as a matter-of-fact. “He hates the smell of dead fish. He hates that the sand clings to his clothes. He hates—”

“Well, we hate Conner,” I interrupt her. She laughs but doesn’t reprimand me like she usually does. “Where is he, anyway?” I ask, looking around the crowded beach. Not that I miss the douche but I’m just curious where in the hell he went. He left us the moment we came down to the beach.

I try to think of all the fun we’re going to have this week, but the fact that she brought up Conner has my mood changing. The fact that he hates the beach makes me want to bury his ass in the sand up to his mouth and let the crabs pinch him. Or stab him with a straw and toss him into the ocean for a shark to have for dinner. *Now, that would be a legitimate reason to hate the beach.* It makes me smile as I imagine him screaming like the little bitch he is.

“He said he had to go use the restroom.” She answers my previous question. “But he’s been gone for a long time.” She tilts her head to the side as if she just realized this. Sitting on the beach time can get away from you.

I stand up and dust the sand off my jean shorts. “Let’s go get a drink.” I offer to try to keep her occupied and not wondering where in the hell he wandered off to. I can already see her mind churning as she tries to figure out what’s taking him so long to pee. I mean all they gotta do is whip it out, wash their hands, and go.

I lean down and reach for her hand. “Come on.” I say with a smile. I pull her to stand and turn our backs to the ocean. Little makeshift huts that have been turned into bars litter the beach for miles. They are literally only feet from the water at some parts. This is heaven if you ask me. The beach and alcohol all in one place; it doesn’t get any better than this. Well, unless you add the beach sex.

“What can I get you?” A shirtless man with dreadlocks asks as we walk up to the little circular bar.

We lean against it, and I place my clutch purse and cell phone on it. “How about a shot of tequila?” I ask Becca with a smile. I’m ready to get things rolling. We’ve already been on the beach for an hour, I haven’t had a drop of alcohol yet and the sun is already going down. We spent almost seven hours of our day getting here plus the time change. I’m ready to start this vacation.

Now is as good a time as any to get started. I’m gonna need alcohol and a ton of it, in order to put up with Conner. As soon as we got to our room he started complaining which is beyond insane. We don’t have to pay a freaking dollar for our room because Becca’s dad was gracious enough to pay for our ocean view. He had said that since my parents gave us the plane tickets the least he could do was pay for our hotel. But no, our room at a five-star resort isn’t good enough for the devil. *Maybe he would prefer the basement . . . ?*

“I don’t know.” Becca says with a heavy sigh.

I wrap an arm around her shoulder and pull her into my side. “What happened to having fun? Hmm? Partying?” I bump my hip into hers as I try

to get her to smile. “Let’s get drunk and wait until three in the morning and knock on everyone’s hotel room door on our floor while we yell fire.” I offer and she laughs at that.

“We would get in so much trouble.” She says as I pull away from her.

“They would never know it’s us.” I scoff. Who does she think I am? An amateur? I used to do things like that all the time in high school.

She turns to look over at me. Her eyes narrow on me, but a smile tugs at her lips. “I don’t feel like going to jail.”

I look away from her and at the bartender, who is still waiting for my order. I nod my head for the two shots of tequila. “Jail would be better than having to party five days with Conner.” I mumble to myself.

A small hand wraps around my upper arm and I turn back to face her. This time, her eyes are soft and her lips are frowning. “I’m sorry that you don’t like him.” This isn’t the first time she’s apologized for him. “But I couldn’t just leave him back in Seattle.” He followed her from New York to Seattle for school. I guess I can see where she is coming from but it doesn’t mean I have to like it.

“Don’t apologize. I wouldn’t leave my boyfriend behind either.” I say truthfully. But that’s another reason I don’t have one—high maintenance.

“All right. Here you go, ladies.” The bartender returns with two shots of tequila. He places them on the bar and I hand him some cash.

I lift my shot glass and she lifts hers as well. “Cheers to the last vacation we’re probably gonna have for a while.”

I slam back the liquid before I pick up the lime and hold it out for her. I don’t need the lime but she will need the extra one. I prefer to savor the burning sensation all the way down my throat as I swallow. What can I say; I’ve always been one who likes to feel something. Even if that means the feeling is discomfort or pain.

“God.” Becca gasps for air as if she’s been holding her breath. She bites into her lime and then snatches mine out of my hand to bite into it. “That stuff was strong.” She sucks in a deep breath and grimaces.

“It’s tequila.” I say in my duh voice as I look over at her. “It doesn’t get any stronger than straight tequila, silly.” I look up at the bartender and lift

my hand to signal for two more. He winks at me and then gives me a nod.

“I think he likes you.” Becca says with a giggle as he turns his back to us.

“No!” I shake my head. “His job is to flirt and make tips.”

“Come on.” She nudges my side with her elbow. “We’re on vacation and you’re single. Live a little. Just because I have Conner here with me doesn’t mean that you can’t get some.”

“Not that.” I shake my head.

“Is it because of Bradley?” She asks with a naughty smile on her face.

I narrow my eyes at her. “You know that there is nothing there. Bradley is just my fuck buddy.” I state.

She chuckles. “Whatever you say, Ash. Just remember I am going to be your maid of honor when he’s standing at the altar waiting for you.”

I shake my head quickly. “Bradley is a great guy and he will make someone a very good husband someday, but it won’t be mine.” I see him in my future. But I see him coming over with his wife and kids. I don’t see myself waking up with him. I don’t see him holding me tight and telling me he loves me. And we’re both okay with that. Sometimes, two people can have a friendship that allows sex to be involved without having feelings—Bradley and I are that exception.

“Do you see yourself marrying Conner?” This question has been on mind for a while now. They’re both from New York. They got together her freshman year in high school and after she had graduated he moved to Seattle for her. All he has talked about since I met them is how he can’t wait to move back. And the fact that he eye-fucks every woman who walks past him has me wondering why he is even with her.

“I don’t know.” She says softly.

I try not to cringe at her words. “Becca …” I grab her hand and wait for her to look up at me. “Why are you with him? I know exactly why I don’t want anything more with Bradley. But I don’t understand why you are with someone you don’t see a future with.” The fact she can think about a future with him makes me want to shake her small frame until her eyes roll back into her head. No woman should need a man, but if you choose to have one, he should lift you up. Not drag you down.

“I want to marry him,” she whispers, and I refrain from sighing. “And honestly”—she swallows nervously—“every Valentine’s Day, birthday, and Christmas”—she pauses as she bites her bottom lip—“I expect to get a ring, but it never happens.” I barely hear the last sentence because the drunks around us are so loud.

I grind my teeth together. He has officially brainwashed her. “Where are our shots?” I growl, changing the subject.

“I can’t do another one. I’ll puke,” she says, shaking her head and pulling her pink-colored lips back in disgust.

“Fine. I’ll drink both,” I say with a careless shrug. When it comes to drinking, I can keep up with the best of them. I have a high tolerance for alcohol, which usually sucks.

“Maybe I should stick to beer.” She places her arms on the countertop of the bar and then her head falls between them, making her dark hair fan out over the bar.

“Ugh, Becca.” I yank her up by her shoulders. “That’s gross. Drunks have puked there.” This is like the prime place for Spring Break and summer. College kids are literally crawling around in the sand here. Some don’t even look old enough to be out of high school.

“So? I’ve puked on my own hair before,” she says, rolling her dark green eyes at my concern. One particular incident comes to mind—our freshman year at a Halloween party. It took me forever to wash out all the puke. That’s what happens when she drinks vodka and plays beer pong.

She sighs heavily as her eyes dart around the beach and bar area as if she’s lost. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I shouldn’t have brought that up.” I always seem to make things worse for her. She is content living in her little Conner bubble, but I always seem to pop it.

“It’s not your fault.” She waves off my apology. “Conner is just pissing me off.” She looks down at the clock on her phone. “What takes a man so long to pee?”

I look up and scan the hundreds of people on the beach. I finally spot him across the circular bar talking to a blond bitch who looks to be no older than fifteen. My eyes narrow on him when he smiles brightly. He is clearly

staring down at her tits while she blabbers nonsense, I'm sure. I look down at the empty shot glass that held my first tequila shot and contemplate throwing it across the bar and hitting him in the head with it but choose not to. My luck, I would hit some random person and I really don't wanna go to jail in Panama City. Anything is possible but hell no would I go for Conner.

"He's right there." I say instead, pointing at him.

"What is he doing over there?" she grinds out. "Who is she? He said he had to go to the bathroom."

"Well, go over there and get him," I demand, feeling my anger toward him rise. "He's your boyfriend, and if he's not gonna act like it, then leave his ass behind," I say carelessly. I have this theory about men. They're only good for one thing—sex! I'm not saying that women are any better. People, in general, lie. These days, people always want the next best thing. And once they have you, you are no longer the next best thing for said person. It's that grass is always greener bullshit!

Now, I'm all for casual sex, obviously. I sleep with my best friend. But Conner is on a whole different level and I just plain hate him! I don't use that word easily, but I do when it comes to him. I have never known a man to be as bad as he is. He is like the devil's nephew. Or possibly his son. He definitely hangs on their family tree and eats little puppies for dinner.

I only see the bad in him, but she sees all the good in him. I don't know how she can list one great thing. All I can say is the sex must be earth-shatteringly amazing, but I just can't see him being good at anything besides loving himself.

"Here he comes," she says with a scowl on her face.

I watch him make his way through the crowd of girls wearing lingerie for bikinis. Geez, I feel overdressed in my tank top and shorts. He pulls his shoulders back, pressing his chest forward as if he works hard for those muscles. I laugh to myself. He's such a pansy ass.

"There you guys are," he says with a big smile on his face as he comes to stand beside us. He wraps his arms around her and leans down, placing a deep kiss on her lips. I turn to give them my back as I roll my eyes. He's totally gonna ruin our vacation. It's like as soon as he puts his hands on her,

she turns into a puddle of water at his feet. “Where have you girls been?” He asks as if he’s really been looking for us.

“Hey,” I yell at the bartender who has his back to me. He turns around to face me. “Tequila shots?” I question, knowing that I had ordered two more like five minutes ago.

He nods his head and hurries to make my shots that he obviously forgot.

“Hey, there’s a concert going on down at the pier. There are like seven bands. They said it’s gonna start in an hour. Then everyone is going to some foam party afterward at a club nearby. You guys wanna go?” he asks after he pulls away from her lips.

“No!” I say flatly, as I give him my *go to hell* look.

“Why not?” Becca asks softly. “It sounds like a lot of fun.” She reaches out and places her hand on my arm. “Come on, Ash. We’re on vacation.”

I go to speak, but he beats me to it. “Let her stay here if she wants to be a dud.” I narrow my eyes at his shit-colored brown ones.

“Conner—” she snaps, turning to look at him.

“No, he’s right,” I interrupt whatever she was about to say to him. If she stands up for me, he will get mad at her and then leave her here with me to go to the concert and party at the club by himself. I know exactly how he works. And I know he’s secretly hoping for exactly that, but it’s not gonna happen. She let him come on this trip because she wants to spend time with him and I don’t wanna ruin that. “You guys go ahead. I’m gonna have a few more drinks here and then I’ll meet you over there. Okay?”

She frowns and stares at me for a long second. “Are you sure? We don’t have to go if you don’t want to. I’m fine staying here.”

“Did you even hear what I said?” he asks her. “It starts in an hour. We need to go down there now to get a good spot.”

I ignore his demand and just nod my head at her. That’s what he wants. I’m not going to keep her here so his pathetic fucking ass can go and dance with other women while he gropes them. “You guys go. I’ll be right there.”

“Okay,” she says slowly, not really wanting to go but torn on what she should say. She pulls me into a tight hug. I look up and throw Conner a *fuck you* look and he returns it with ease.

They walk away from the bar and I continue to watch him lead her down the beach until I can't see them through the crowd anymore. "So sorry about that."

I look at the bar and the guy is placing two shots of tequila on the bar in front of me. "It's fine," I say, waving him off. I know they're crazy busy tonight. I'm just one person in the sea of thousands. I probably would have forgotten too.

"It's on the house," he says before winking at me again.

"No, that's fine. I'll pay." He ignores me, walking away to go help another customer. I pick the first one up and down it. Then do the same with the second one. I lick the remainder off my lips and then turn to watch the crowd as my throat burns, and my chest heats up. Everyone looks to be having so much fun. Couples are making out; some even look like they need a room as they hump each other on the sand. A few couples are playing volleyball just down the beach while bright red and blue umbrellas line up as far as the eye can see along the shoreline. I look longingly at the big sun as half of it has disappeared beyond the horizon. It's so beautiful here. Peaceful. Even with all the drunks.

A young high school age couple walks up to the bar a few spots down from me. The guy wraps his arms around her from behind as she leans over the bar. They're laughing and I'm positive underage, but the bartender takes her order and starts to make it. The guy pulls her around and kisses her deeply. I stand and watch like a pervert as these two very young kids make out. It makes me sad; now, I wish I had brought Bradley with me. He wanted to come when he found out that Conner was tagging along this morning. He quickly finished getting dressed and then told me he was going home to pack and he would be here later tonight. I told him it would be okay. I handle Conner every day; five days on a beach can't be that bad. Now, I wish I had let him come.

Pulling my eyes away from the young couple in love, I look down at my phone and pull up his number.

Me: *Having fun without me?*

The message shows read immediately and then the three dots bounce around, indicating he is typing.

Brad: *Not nearly as much fun as you are having with Conner.*

I roll my eyes but type back.

Me: *Oh, please! I've already contemplated throwing an empty shot glass at his head.*

Brad: *Contemplated? You should have done it. Honestly, as your best friend, I must say if you thought you were better than that, you're not.*

Me: *I'm offended.* I type back with a smile.

Brad: *Oh, now you're just lying.*

I type out *Wish you would have come with me* but then delete it. That makes me sound needy. And well, it also makes it sound like we're a couple and we're not. We never have been.

Placing my elbows on the bar, I place my chin in my hands and let out a sigh. I close my eyes and try to tune out the drunks and the loud music from a DJ that is set up on a stage a little ways down. I focus on the ocean behind me and step out of my flip-flops to feel the sand beneath my feet until the dinging of my phone interrupts it.

Brad: *I do have the worst case of blue balls, though. Thanks for that, by the way.*

I burst out laughing as I stare down at it.

"Hey, that's nothing to laugh about."

I snap my head up to look into a set of dark brown eyes and ask, “Didn’t your mother tell you it’s rude to read over someone’s shoulder?” Snatching my phone off the bar.

He points down at it now in my hand. “Didn’t your mother tell you to finish things that you start?” *Prick!* “Go and take care him,” he orders with a laugh as if he thinks he’s funny.

Is this guy for real? “He has two hands,” I state. That’s probably the only way a douche like this gets off anyway. He has a wife beater on that looks like he found at Baby Gap. I mean can’t he afford an adult shirt? His dark hair is slicked back and he has a cigarette tucked behind his ear. He has that whole bad boy look going on but not in a hot *I wanna jump your bones* kind of way.

“Cold.” He continues to chuckle shaking his head. “So cold. Now, I know why the poor guy has blue balls.”

I turn to fully face him and his brown eyes look into mine. “Women can do more than lay on their backs or fall to their knees when a man decides he wants to get laid,” I say as a matter-of-fact.

He smirks. “Is that what you do when you get wet?”

My mouth falls open. The audacity. “Excuse me?” I snap.

“You take care of it yourself? I highly doubt it.” He looks me up and down and I am thankful that I have a tank top and jean shorts over my bikini. “Let me guess”—he places a finger on his chin as he looks up in thought—“you gave the poor bastard a piece and then when he came back for seconds, you left him hanging,” he says as if he knows what Bradley and I do. “Was it not up to your standards?” he asks blatantly. I go to open my mouth, but he continues. “Was he not the biggest you’ve ever had?” I stare at him in amazement. What kind of idiot asks someone these types of questions? I only have one answer—Conner. This guy could be Conner’s twin. I hate this guy already. “Maybe he doesn’t like how small your tits are.” He gestures to my chest.

“You son of a bitch!” I yell. He does that stupid little smirk again, reaching out I shove him.

“Bitch!” he sneers as his arms swing in the air while he tries to keep his balance. The guy is obviously drunk.

He manages to stay on his feet and he takes a step to me. I push my chest into his and look up at him. I’m not afraid of anyone, even if he is a drunk ass pumped up on steroids. “Don’t you dare talk to me like that!” I shout. “Just who the hell do you think you are?” I demand.

He places his hands on my shoulders as I go to lift my knee hitting him in the nuts when a hand cuts between us, and I’m shoved backward. “Whoa,” a man says as his body follows suit.

“What the hell?” I ask as I shove my finger into the muscular back. “Are all you Floridians this rude?” I demand. With a huff, I place my hand on my hips and stare up at the back of the man who rudely interrupted the crazy conversation I was having with a complete stranger. “Unbelievable,” I mutter to myself as I look up and see his black baseball cap he’s wearing backward. It’s worn on the ends of the bill, making the black look more of a dark gray color.

“I think it’s time you go somewhere else,” the man standing in front of me growls to the man I was about to knee in the balls.

“Who the hell are you? Her boyfriend?” he snaps back in the guy’s face. “That bitch …”

I lean to the right to be able to see the jackass. And the man in front of me, the one blocking us, reaches up and grabs the guy’s wife beater and yanks him to him. The already stretched material tears a little at his force. “I’m gonna be the guy who beats your fucking ass if you don’t walk away right now!” His words mean trouble, but his voice is calm. He speaks slowly as if the drunk idiot can’t process what he’s being told. Ball cap man shows no fear to the idiot he’s holding in his fists.

I smile in satisfaction. Maybe gentlemen are still out there. The guy tries yanking himself out of the other’s hold, but he doesn’t break free. His shirt does tear a little more, though. The man’s face changes from anger to compliance, knowing baseball cap is going to kick his ass. He throws his hands up and smirks again. I want baseball cap guy to punch it off his face. “All right, man. I don’t wanna cause any problems.” Sure, he does. He leans

in closer to the guy's face. "She's all yours," he says and then licks his lips. I pull mine back with disgust.

My protector shoves him as he lets him go. The douche gives me one last look with his bloodshot brown eyes before he starts to walk away. "Learn some manners," I yell at him as he starts to walk into the crowd. He doesn't turn around to face me, but he does lift his right hand and flip me the bird.

"Douche!" People never cease to amaze me. I turn back to face the bar.

"Sorry about that," baseball cap guy now beside me says.

"I was about to take him down." I'm not much into the damsel-in-distress situations. I lift my hand to get the bartender. He ignores me.

"A *you're welcome* would have sufficed," he says with laughter.

I snort. "I didn't need the help." I fist my shaking hands down on the bar. I don't know if it's the adrenaline or the three shots of tequila catching up with me, but my heart is pounding in my chest, and I'm breathing heavy.

He lets out a deep laugh, and I finally turn back to face him, planning to tell him to *fuck off* like the last idiot. But words fail me when I look up at the man. He wears a pair of black aviators shielding his eye from me. But I don't need to see them to know he's hot. His defined jaw is covered in a day or two stubble and my first thought is what it would feel like as he runs it against my legs. I lower my eyes to his lips; a slow and sexy smile spreads across them as if he can read my mind. And I pray that he can. "It didn't look that way." His deep voice rumbles with laughter.

Do you ever look at someone and your first thought is *fuck*? Because that's what I'm thinking now. *Fuck me!* All of a sudden, being rescued and carried off by my knight in shining armor doesn't sound so bad. Only he isn't wearing any armor; he's wearing a white tank top. You know the kind I'm talking about; the ones that look like it was once a t-shirt, but he just cut the sleeves off it and half of the side of the shirt is gone. I think muscle shirt is the proper term. His sides and chiseled abs are on display. He can carry me off to anywhere he pleases. "It looked like a woman fighting with her boyfriend," he declares.

"I don't have a boyfriend," I respond with a stupid smile on my face. And this is the exact reason why. You never know when a hot guy may show up

and take you for a ride.

He nods his head once as his full lips pull back into a smile. His perfect white teeth remind me of a toothpaste commercial. I wonder how he gets them that white? “Good to know.” His voice is deep. And just remembering the way he spoke to that jackass has me wanting him to save me again. Hmm. If he walks away, I might have to pick a fight with someone else.

“You obviously weren’t paying very much attention.” I hate that I can’t see his eyes. Is he looking at me? My chest? My legs? Can he see that my chest is rising and falling fast as I breathe heavily? Or the goose bumps that now cover my arm because I can’t get the image of his head between my legs out of my mind? Even though he wears a hat, I know he has dark hair; his sideburns give it away, and his stubble is just as dark.

The sun is setting behind me and I fist my hands down by my side to keep from yanking off his glasses.

“Thanks, though,” I say because that is the correct thing to say. You know, my mother did raise me with manners, after all.

“Glad I could help. A woman like you could be a little more careful out here all alone.” He’s fishing for information. I’ve played this game enough before to know how it works. Well, might as well give the man that much.

He reaches up and runs his hand down his face and my knees buckle at the sound of his stubble against his palm. I shift on my feet where I stand and his tongue slowly licks his lips. I suddenly have the urge to kiss him. To grab his shirt like he did to that guy and pull him down to me. Would he kiss me back? Would he toss me on top of the bar and fuck me in front of everyone? Why does that turn me on so much?

Slow down, Ash. Deep breath. “A woman doesn’t have to have a man,” I decide to say instead of making my move. Let him come to me.

He smiles as he leans up against the bar, crossing one ankle over the other. *Yes, get comfortable*. “I didn’t say they did.”

I look over his black swim trunks and can see his legs are just as muscular as the rest of his body. He reaches his right hand up and I watch, waiting for him to remove his glasses. Instead, he adjusts his hat and the

action makes the muscles in his arms bulge. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from moaning.

“You implied I needed to be careful because I don’t have a man at my side to protect me,” I argue although my body is screaming to touch him.

“It can’t hurt, can it?” The little wind that we have blows his shirt to the side and I take a quick glimpse at his defined abs. My mouth starts to water just imagining running my tongue along the lines. He laughs as he catches me and I watch them flex from his laughter. He’s toned—fit—but not one of those gym rats who can barely fit through a door. He looks really tall, but then again, I’m only five-foot-four.

“I guess you just proved that.” I place my right hand out to introduce myself. “Sasha,” I lie. I’m not for giving my real name to men I meet at the bar. The next thing you know, they find you on all the social media sites and you can’t get rid of them.

“Call me Ry,” he says pushing off the bar and placing his hand in mine. They’re much bigger than I expected but soft for a guy. He certainly doesn’t work outside or in construction. His long fingers curl around my hand and he tightens his grip. I purse my lips to keep from sighing.

“Well, I appreciate the help, Ry,” I say, trying to not sound winded.

“It was my pleasure.” He releases my hand, and mine instantly feels cold. He straightens up to his full height and I have to tilt my head back a little to look up at him. *Give him a reason to stay!*

“Let me buy you a drink,” I offer. He goes to open his mouth, but I continue. “It’s the least I can do after saving me and all.” Can I look any more desperate? What can I say? He’s the one I want for the night.

You ever go shopping and see a pair of shoes that you just have to have? Like you will spend every last penny you have on that pair of shoes? That’s how I feel about him. I want him on top of me. Under me. I want to wear him tonight, and I will do whatever it is gonna cost me. *Take off your glasses.*

“No, thanks,” he says, and I try to keep my smile up at his rejection. “But I will buy you a drink.” Before I can say anything, he turns to the bartender as he asks me, “What would you like?”

You! “Tequila. Please.”

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CHAPTER FOUR

RYDER

Jaycent and I arrived in Florida a couple of hours ago. We then spent some time at the hotel bar before having dinner. We had just decided to hit the beach about an hour ago because the woman working at the front desk of the resort told us there was a concert down there tonight. I happened to be walking down to the pier when I had heard a woman screaming at a man. I figured it was a couple fighting and was gonna let it go. I'm sure this kind of thing happens out here all the time, but when I saw him putting his hands on her, I had to intervene. I wasn't raised to stand by when someone was in need of help. Luck would have it they didn't even know each other.

Sasha hands me one of the tequila shots that the bartender just handed her, and I lift it up. "Cheers."

"Cheers." She clinks her glass against mine. I stand there and stare down at the beautiful woman, just taking her in. Her light blue eyes are damn near the same color as the ocean behind us. They leave my face and travel down my body for the third time since she's actually looked at me. They come to my shorts, and she very slowly runs her tongue around the rim of her shot glass to collect the salt. She opens her pink satin lips and tosses back the shot in one swallow. I feel the tension as my cock starts to grow as I picture her licking salt from my cock while on her knees, my hands in her long blond hair and those eyes staring up at me. Begging me to take her. She slams the now empty shot glass down on the bar top, and I offer my untouched glass to her.

She eyes it skeptically as she looks at my tequila shot still raised. I push it toward her in offering. "I owe you a drink," she reminds me as if I don't remember she almost got her ass kicked by a man five minutes ago.

“I’m being a gentleman.” Really, I just wanna watch her lick the salt off it with that tongue of hers and then watch her swallow it as I imagine it’s my cock. Nothing gentlemanly about that, but it sounded good.

She takes it from me, but her eyes narrow at me a little bit. “Just so you know, two shots won’t get me in bed with you.”

So sex with me is already on her mind? I try to hide my smile but fail miserably. “Is that a challenge?” *What would she do if I kissed her right now?*

She smiles, one that makes her blue eyes shine brighter and two little dimples appear on her cheeks. She looks young but old enough for me, if that makes any sense. “You don’t want to challenge me,” she says with a laugh.

Oh, but I do! “Well, just so I know what I’m dealing with here”—I place my forearm on the bar and lean over onto it—“how many shots would it take if someone were interested?” Not like she needs the alcohol. I see the way she is looking at me. I would bet my life that I could fuck her sober.

She throws her head back and laughs as if I just told her the funniest joke she’s ever heard. Since her hypnotizing eyes are no longer staring into mine, I take the opportunity to quickly look at her body. She has a tight white tank top on and a pair of daisy duke shorts. Two thin bright pink straps come up from underneath her top and wrap around her neck. Her blue jean shorts sit extremely low on her hips, and I wonder if she has bikini bottoms on underneath them.

“I could drink you under the table.”

My eyes snap back up to hers. Before I can remember what question I asked her. She slides the rim of the shot glass against her lips while she twists it in her hand before she downs it like the previous one.

Right! Our challenge. Drinking until she finds me attractive enough to go back up to my room with me. “We’ll see about that,” I say as I gesture to the bartender for another round.

“And by the way …” She takes the back of her hand and wipes what’s left of the tequila from her lips. Fuck, I wish I could have done that with my tongue. “That was my fifth.”

“Shot of tequila?” I ask surprised. Not sure why, though. That was the second one I saw her take in a matter of seconds.

She nods. “So you have some catching up to do.”

I just give her a cocky smile as I look her up and down. She doesn’t sway on her feet, and her eyes aren’t hooded like most after drinking five shots of tequila. That tells me one thing; this woman can handle her liquor, which *would* surprise me, considering how small she is in size. “Want to make a wager?” Let’s make this a little more interesting.

She cocks a dark eyebrow and pushes her right hip out. She’s adorable and feisty. So different from the New York women I’m used to. The ones who only sip expensive wine with their noses up in the air. They can’t laugh or even smile due to the Botox injected into their faces. “Absolutely,” she says, lifting her chin. “I already know what I’m gonna have you do when I win.”

Hopefully, it’s you. I chuckle but am not surprised one bit. The bartender puts down the two shots I had ordered, and I tell him to bring me a couple more. I look back over at her. “What if you’re lying?” I ask. “I mean, five shots? What if you’re just trying to get me drunk to take advantage of me?” I tease. We both already know this is going to lead to my room upstairs with her clothes on my floor and her mouth around my cock. Just the thought of that has my dick twitching with impatience.

She leans forward, pressing her chest against mine. The back of my neck heats up from her closeness. “It would be fair since that is what you’re trying to do to me,” she states.

For a second, I’m confused by what she said. I raise my hands in surrender. “I know we’re making a bet, but if it came down to it and you were too drunk to walk, I assure you that I would make sure you got back to my room and you would be safe. I would not take advantage of you.” No matter what the situation is.

To my surprise, she grabs my shirt and pulls me towards her, my sunglasses almost falling off my face. Leaning up on her tiptoes, she places her lips by my ear. The smell of strawberries hits my nose and I grab her exposed skin right above her shorts. She smiles when she feels how hard I

am for her. “That’s too bad.” They tighten as her breath hits my ear and her voice drops to a seductive tone. One I imagine her having as she undresses for me. “That’s exactly the type of guy I’m looking for tonight.”

I clamp my jaw shut to prevent myself from moaning and looking like an idiot. Women like her—the ones who can express what they want and how they want it—are the biggest turn-on to a man. I imagine her lying on my bed while she tells me what to do with her step-by-step … when, all of a sudden, she pulls back, ripping herself from my hold and turns to walk away.

I quickly reach out and grab her arm, pulling her back to me. She gasps as I push her back up against the bar, pinning her in. My hands go to her narrow hips. Her blue eyes look up at me, heavy with want. Her chest rises and falls quickly from breathing heavy. A smile tugs at her lips. I lean my face down to hers and whisper, “Darling, tonight I can be anything you want me to be!”

“I want you to be mine!” she says without pause.

Without another word, I reach around her and toss back one of the tequila shots. And then the other. “About that bet …”

“Forget it!” She places her hands inside my shirt. She runs them up and over my abs, and they tighten on instinct. Slowly make their way up my chest. My eyes stare into hers, and she lets out a sigh of pure pleasure. “I’m ready to go whenever you are,” she says before her nails scrape my skin, setting it on fire as she pulls them downward. I throw some money down from my pocket and grab her hand, ready to start my night with her.

ASHLYN

A moan escapes my lips before I can even open my heavy eyes. My muscles ache and my skin still tingles. I allowed the man from the bar to take me back to his room last night. And man, was it the best decision I have made in a while. He was correct. He was exactly what I wanted, and that was nowhere close to a gentleman. And not only was he amazing, but he was also able to perform several times! Can you say winning?

You can call me a slut, a whore, or easy. I just don't care! The fact of the matter is that we are animals. And we're built to be attracted to others. Smell, sight, and taste—they make us do wild and crazy things. Now, I don't always pick a guy out at the bar and allow him to take me home, but yes, it has happened before. But this guy takes the cake!

With a sigh of total satisfaction, I roll over onto my other side. Opening my eyes slowly, I see him sleeping beside me. Yes, I slept over. I didn't have enough strength to even get out of bed, let alone make it to my hotel room. But thankfully, he is staying in the same hotel as Becca and I.

He lies on his back with one arm above his head and the other on his hard, smooth chest. And I have the instant urge to go again. Which is crazy because we've only been asleep for a couple of hours. But my pussy tightens, reminding me just how fucking great he felt. The way his hands held me possessively. The way he bit my neck and my body shivered. The way he fucked me like he couldn't get enough. God, my breath comes quicker with need.

I could just get up, get dressed, and walk out of his door. Never having to see him again. Save us both the trouble of the awkward morning after—*this was just a fuck. You don't have to pretend you want my number, and I don't want yours*. Don't get me wrong. A guy like this—one who is hot and knows how to fuck—is hard to find, but I'm sure he lives far, far away from Seattle. Plus, I'm moving to New York in a week, so what are the odds of ever seeing him again? But that's also what makes it sweeter. *I will never see him again!*

Making up my mind, I slowly push the thick, fluffy white down comforter and loose white sheet to the foot of the bed. I sit and take in his naked body. His large smooth chest rises up and then falls as he breathes deeply. His right hand rests on it. And his cock lies limp between his muscular thighs. My mouth instantly starts to water.

Not wanting to wait any longer, I reach over and take it in my hand. When he doesn't make a single move, I get up and straddle his legs. With my free hand, I take my tangled hair that falls in front of my eyes and flip it over to one side to get it out of the way.

Slowly, I stroke him with my left hand. It takes a couple of minutes, but it starts to harden as his hips begin to move along with it. A little moan escapes his lips as his stomach flexes while he shifts his body. My hand picks up its pace.

“Good morning,” I whisper as I lick my lips. He moans again, but his eyes remain closed. Wanting to get this show on the road, I lower my head. Wrapping my lips around the head of his cock, I continue to slowly run my hand up and down his shaft. His hips thrust upward, letting me know that he wants me to take more.

I open my mouth wider and take a little more of him in. He makes a sound of appreciation, and I look up over his body to see his head lifted off the pillow and a set of dark green eyes staring down at me. I remember thinking how beautiful they were after he took his sunglasses off when we entered the hotel last night. They have the same heat in them that they had then. His lips part as he sucks in ragged breaths, and if I could, I would smile up at him.

He lifts his hand from above his head at the same time as the other one on his chest. They both push the hair back from my face as he grabs it in a tight grip. My body breaks out in goose bumps, and I shift on my knees as wetness pools between my legs. I’m pretty sure I love giving head more than the men like receiving it. This is where I can be in control. I love to hear them come undone.

The right corner of his lips rises slowly in a cocky smirk as he stares down at me. “Just can’t get enough, can you?” His voice is gruff from just waking, and it sends a shiver through me. *Cocky bastard!* But I can’t argue with it. The man is a sex God. And I wanted one last taste before I had to leave.

I suck up to the tip of his head, I go to remove my lips to take a breath but he pushes my head back down. “Oh, no,” His deep voice growls; this time, he’s still staring down at me, enjoying the show. “You want my cock? You’re gonna take it!” He says as a matter-of-fact while pushing my head farther down.

I choke on his cock as he hits the back of my throat, and I close my eyes as I wiggle my ass up in the air, needing him there as well. “Fuck, you sure know how to wake a man up!” He sighs as he allows my head to come up. His hips thrust again, and he pushes my head back down. My heart races and my pussy throbs as he fucks my mouth. Harder and faster with each thrust. The sound of my moaning and gagging fills his silent hotel room as I allow him to use me as his own personal whore. But that’s what I am, right? We’re not making love, and that’s okay because love isn’t what I want. I’m not that stupid girl who believes feelings come with sex. You have to have attraction, yes, but you can have the best sex of your life and not have feelings for someone.

My fingernails dig into his thighs as I hover over him. My cheeks burn, and my jaw screams in protest as his large cock fills my mouth. Alcohol still lingers in my veins and the room sways a little as he continues to control my head by my hair.

All of a sudden, he yanks on my hair, pulling my mouth off him. I hiss in a breath as I look up at him through tear-streaked eyes. He sits up quickly and releases me. My body falls down to the bed face first, unable to hold myself up as I try to catch my breath. He grabs my arms and pulls me closer to the headboard. I lie on my stomach unable to speak and move as he positions me where he wants me.

“Spread your legs!” He commands and then his firm hand slaps my ass.

“Fu … ck.” I moan as my hands clench the white fitted sheet. The sting lingers on my sensitive skin.

The bed shifts as I feel his knees push mine apart and he centers himself between them. My ass and pussy are in full view for him to examine. Once he gets into position, I feel his hand between my legs. My pussy clenches as he runs two fingers along my wet lips. “Did you wake up this wet or did my cock in your mouth do this to you?” his deep voice asks in awe. I smile that I’m doing the same thing he was doing to me.

“I woke up this way,” I answer as I push my face down into the sheet, letting him know I’m ready to repeat what he did last night.

“I see,” He says as he pushes in one of his fingers. I suck in a deep breath as I push against him. *I need more!* “Were you dreaming about being fucked?” He asks as he removes his finger and then adds two this time.

“Yes!” I pant as I rock my hips back and forth. Fuck, I swear I’m gonna get off in a matter of minutes. “Fuck me!” I demand.

His fingers leave my pussy, and he leans over my back, pressing me more into the bed. “You want it as rough as you got it last night, sweetheart?” He asks, placing his mouth by my ear.

I nod my head, but it’s hard since he’s pressing me into the bed. “Yes,” I manage to say as I squirm underneath him. I can feel his cock on my ass, and I whimper.

“I wanna hear you beg,” he whispers roughly. “I wanna hear you tell me how wet you are for me and how badly you need me.”

“Please,” I gasp as I continue to squirm. His deep voice and his words have my nipples hard.

“Let me explain this to you.” He grabs my wrists and yanks my hands, causing me to lose my grip on the sheet. I cry out as he pulls them behind my back. Crossing them, he grabs them in one large hand while he sits back on his knees. “I’m not going to do anything to you until you beg me,” he says as a matter-of-fact.

I try to pry them apart, but he’s too strong. He has me where he wants me. Or better yet, where I want him to have me. “Your pussy is soaked, sweetheart.” I shift my ass, as it’s up in the air, knowing I’m completely open to him. “Tell me what you want me to do to it.”

I swallow as I try to suck in a breath. He’s pressing on my arms so much that it’s pushing my chest into the bed and making it hard to breathe. “I want you to fuck it!” I say as I try to free my arms again.

He just chuckles. “How should I fuck it?” He asks, and then his free hand to smack my ass again. I moan as I rock back and forth. The feel of the sheet against my nipples helps relieve some of the tension I feel between my legs.

“However you want,” I say honestly.

I flinch when I feel his free hand between my thighs once again. “I like the sound of that.” All of a sudden, he thrusts two fingers into my soaked pussy, and I scream. A cry of pain then follows as I try to shift on the bed. I’m so sensitive from the fucking he handed me last night that it literally hurts. But in the best way. Not many men can give you that feeling of pain while delivering the pleasure as well. He has that gift.

He pulls them out and I relax. He lets go of my arms and I’m about to move them, to stretch them out, when he speaks. “Don’t move! Keep your arms where they’re at.” So like a good little girl, I do as he says.

I hear him walking around, and then I hear the familiar sound of a wrapper. I smile, knowing I’m about to get what I want.

The bed dips again as he places himself behind me once more. I hear the sound of something clanking, like metal, and go to look around. A hand presses on the side of my head, pushing it into the bed. “However I want,” he reminds me, and I nod the best I can.

“However you want,” I repeat on a whimper.

Grabbing my arms, I then feel leather wrapping around them. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from crying out as he pulls what I now feel is a belt tightly before fastening it. I take deep breaths as I close my eyes and try to break free of the belt holding me motionless, but it’s useless. It’s more unforgiving than his hand was.

He reaches up and wraps my hair around one of his fists. He yanks my head up off the bed while his knees push my legs farther apart. I’m being pulled in all directions, and even though my body screams in pain, my pussy throbs in anticipation.

“This is how I want you,” he growls. “Bound and helpless.” Slowly and with extreme softness, he proceeds to stretch my throbbing pussy open with his hard cock. I lie there just as he wants for several seconds as he allows my body to accommodate his large size until he’s all the way in. “Now, tell me how much you like it!” He demands as he pulls back and slams forward, causing the room to fill with my cries.

***

I make my way down the very long hallway. My hair is a tangled mess, my bathing suit top is hanging halfway out of my clutch, and I'm carrying my flip-flops in my hand while doing what you call the walk of shame.

I stumble over my own feet and have to place my hand on the wall. The busy pattern of the wallpaper is making it tough for me to keep myself upright. But I eventually make it to our hotel room door. Pulling my key card out of my clutch, I place it in the slot and manage to push the very heavy door open with my weak arms. As soon as I make it into the room, I toss my clutch onto the floor as I drop my flip-flops and lean up against the cool wall. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. *Damn, I'm winded.*

"Wow! Someone looks like shit!"

I look up through my freshly fucked blond hair that hangs in my face. Pushing it back, I then narrow my very heavy eyes on Conner. "Go fuck yourself." It was meant to be a *piss off, don't fuck with me* attitude; instead, it came out kind of breathless. The guy I spent the night with has literally drained me of any energy and has turned my body to mush. Which is saying a lot, considering I just mainly laid there this morning while he had his way with me. Twice.

He just stares at me and his black eyes are full of judgment. "Looks like you got fucked enough for both of us," he states.

I push off the wall and walk past him, making sure to throw my shoulder into his as I make my way to my room. Once I make it in, I slam the door shut behind me. I then fall onto the queen-size bed face first. I turn my head to the left and look out the window at the serene ocean. I intended to spend every second out there today soaking up the sun, but now, I find myself closing my eyes.

Just as they close, I hear the bedroom door open. If that's Conner, I'm gonna … "Ash, I got your text last night that you weren't coming to the concert. Did you have fun?" Becca asks me, closing the door behind her. Oh yeah, I did! I texted her the moment Ry and I got into the elevator to let her know I would catch up with her later. Who knew I would spend the entire night with the stranger. "Ash?"

“Huh?” I moan as I hear Becca call my name again. I manage to roll over onto my back and look up at my ceiling as she comes to sit beside me.

“How much did you drink last night?” She asks with a frown on her face. “You look like you’re about to get sick.”

I very slowly shake my head. “Would you believe me if I told you it had nothing to do with alcohol?” I did end up feeling damn good last night once all those shots kicked in, but yeah, that has nothing to do with the way I look right now.

“Then what was it?” She reaches down and touches my tangled hair. I’m sure when I go to brush it, I’m gonna lose a lot of it due to the knots. At this moment, I just don’t care.

I tilt my head to the side and look up at her. Her dark green eyes roam my face and then my upper arms. Her eyes widen as she sees the marks left from Ry’s belt. If I cared, I would cover them up. Instead, I have my arms out to my sides palms up as if I’m about to take flight. “A man,” I say, and her eyes get even bigger. “Well, no, not a man. More like a sex God,” I correct myself. “God, he was… amazing!” I mumble.

She chuckles to herself after that. “So I take it you had a good time?”

I close my eyes. “The best!” A ghost of a smile spreads across my lips. “But I need some sleep now.” Possibly the rest of the trip.

I feel her hand softly pat my head. “Okay. Get some rest.”

Her closing my bedroom door is the last thing I hear before it all goes dark.

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CHAPTER FIVE

RYDER

“Happy birthday to me!” I say in a singsong voice with a smile while standing in front of the large bathroom mirror in my hotel room. A white towel sits low on my hips as I finally shave my face. Three days is too long. I try to concentrate on what I’m doing, but my mind is flooded with memories of the firecracker. The woman was on fire! I don’t think I’ve ever experienced that much sex with one woman in that short amount of time. I couldn’t get enough of her moans, the feel of her tight pussy wrapped around my cock, or the way her body moved with mine. If she hadn’t woken me up this morning to do it all again, I would have thought I dreamed it. Because that’s exactly what she was—a dream. I may have treated her like a cheap whore, but she sure as hell wasn’t even close to that. She just liked sex. And I can’t blame her for that. If she were still here, I’d be buried deep in her right now bent over the bathroom sink. What did surprise me was this morning after we were finished. When we were done, she was ready to leave. There was no awkward goodbye or call me later. She just got out of bed with wobbly legs and got dressed without so much as a kiss my ass. Which I totally did last night. Several times. It was nice yet still surprising to not have to go through that awkward morning after. I’m all about a one-night stand.

I place my razor on the countertop and bend over to splash my face with water, getting all the excess shaving cream off my face. Once I stand, I undo the towel wrapped around my hips and wipe my face with it. I look down at my hard cock. Yep, just thinking of her has made me hard again. I’ll have to take care of that later.

I walk out of my bathroom and into my bedroom. Grabbing my phone off the nightstand, I notice I have three missed calls. All from my sister. I smile

as I hit *accept* on her number.

“Happy birthday to you …” she starts singing to me in greeting. I place her on speakerphone and toss my phone onto the still messy bed. I make my way around the room, grabbing a pair of boxers, jeans, and a white cotton t-shirt. By the time she finishes singing “Happy Birthday,” I’m dressed.

“Thank you,” I say, taking her off speaker and putting it to my ear.

“So how is it? Do you feel old yet?” She laughs at her question.

I smile. “Not one bit.” You would think that after the night I had, I would be dead to the world, but I’m wide-awake and full of energy.

“Did you party hard last night in Paris?” I never told her that my business trip got canceled. Hence, surprising her today.

“Something like that.” I chuckle.

“I tried to call you last night. I know Paris is six hours ahead. I didn’t wanna miss your birthday, but you didn’t answer.”

“Sorry, I was in the middle of something.” That’s the truth. “But I don’t wanna talk about me. I wanna talk about you. Make it to Panama City yet?” I ask as I place my wallet in my back pocket and head toward the front door. The woman I spent the night with has me starving. I need some breakfast. Making my way to the front door, I take a quick look around our hotel suite and notice that Jaycent isn’t here and the door to his room is wide open. He must have got lucky last night as well.

“Yes. We actually arrived yesterday.”

I stop in my tracks. *What?* “I thought you said you weren’t flying out until today?” They were supposed to arrive at noon, I believe.

“Well, that was our plan, but we changed them a couple of weeks ago.”

I frown but start to walk out of the room again. Breakfast can wait. I’m ready to surprise her. “Did Dad get you the penthouse suite?” I ask, knowing that he is paying for their room. And I also know that he didn’t get that room for her ‘cause that’s the room I got.

“No. But we got a beautiful room on the eleventh floor,”

“Eleventh floor, huh?” *I need to know the exact number.*

I press the button for the elevator. “Eleven thirty-four, to be exact,” she answers, and I smile in satisfaction. “It has a great view of the ocean. Just

beautiful! But I see clouds in the distance. I think a storm is coming."

"Good. I'm glad that you are enjoying your vacation. You deserve it." I step into the elevator as it opens for me and press the eleven.

"Well, I don't want to keep you. Just wanted to tell you happy birthday and that I love you." Her voice is soft, and I hate how sad it sounds. But thankfully, she is coming back to New York next week. I can't wait to be able to see her on a daily basis.

"Thank you," I say with a huge smile on my face. "Love you too. I hope you have a great time in Panama City."

"You have fun in Paris celebrating your birthday, Ry. I'll see you soon." We say our goodbyes and hang up. I place my phone in the front pocket of my jeans just as the elevator dings and the doors slide open.

I make my way down the hallway, looking for her room number. I lift my hand and knock on it twice.

"Who is it?" I hear a man call out.

I frown. Who would possibly be with her? I look to make sure it's the right room. Yep. Maybe it's her friend's boyfriend.

"Room service," I say in a high-pitch voice, trying to disguise it.

I hear a couple of voices speaking softly to one another before I hear the click of a lock. The door swings open and the smile drops off my face as I stare into dark brown eyes. The same dark brown eyes I would like to rip out.

"What the fuck? Ryder?" Conner, my sister's very annoying, supposed-to-be *ex-boyfriend* stands on the other side of the door staring at me wide-eyed and confused. I have the urge to punch him in his face, but the high-pitch scream from the other side of the room gets my attention. My sister runs toward me with open arms, and I take a few steps back as she leaps into my arms.

"OhmyGod," she squeals. I hug her tightly as I spin her around once before I place her on her feet. "Ryder! Ryder!" She jumps up and down excitedly. "What are you doing here? Oh, my God, Ryder!" She hugs me once again, and when she pulls away, she yanks me into her hotel room by

my hand. I look down at the punk bitch who still holds the door open until we are in. Then he slams it shut.

“I’m so confused!” Becca says as she shakes her head with a huge smile covering her face. “What are you doing here?”

I smile down at her. “I came to surprise you.” I look over at Conner as he lets out a snort of disbelief. “What is *he* doing here?” I ask, pointing over at him as if there’s another *he* in the room. “Thought you guys broke up?”

“We got back together,” She responds, her smile fading.

“What is going on out here? I’m trying to sleep, for Christ’s sake!”

I hear a woman’s voice snap from behind me. Becca looks around me, and that original smile is back on her face. “My brother surprised me.” She grabs my hand and starts jumping up and down.

I pull my hand from hers and turn around to say hello and meet her friend when I come to a halt. The very same woman who I fucked just a few hours ago stands in front of me. Her head is bowed, and she has one hand in her long blond hair while the other is covering her face. But I don’t have to see her blue eyes to know who she is. The marks on her upper arms and the bite mark on her inner thigh that her short shorts barely cover give her away. And my cock instantly hardens. Fuck me! Today must be my lucky day! Happy birthday to me indeed!

“That’s great!” She sighs heavily. “But can you keep it down …?” She lifts her head as her hand drops off her face, and her eyes catch mine. She recognizes me instantly. Her bloodshot but still beautiful blue eyes widen, and her mouth goes slack as she inhales sharply. “What the fuck are you doing here?” she demands.

“Funny! I said the same thing,” Conner growls.

“What …?” My sister starts, but I interrupt her.

“Sasha!” I say with a smile. “Lucky seeing you here.” I clap my hands excitedly. *What are the odds?*

“Sasha?” My sister repeats the word with a frown.

“Uh …” The beautiful woman takes a step back toward her room.

“Why did you call her Sasha?” Conner asks, clearly confused. “Sasha. Why does that name sound familiar?” He asks himself, and then his eyes

widen as he chuckles.

I point at the woman in front of me. “Because that’s her name,” I state already annoyed by the idiot.

“That’s Ashlyn,” he corrects me.

I shake my head. “I think I know her name. I spent all night and morning with her.” Her face goes pale at that.

“What?” Conner and my sister both ask at the same time.

An awkward silence fills the room, and I look around confused as fuck, waiting for someone to explain the elephant in the room to me. “Wait a second.” My sister breaks the silence. “This is the sex God?” My sister asks as she tries to hold in a laugh. She points at me. “This is my brother, Ashlyn,” she informs her.

I smile myself. “Sex God, huh?” So she hasn’t been gone for more than a few hours, and she is already talking about me.

Conner starts to laugh as he slaps his hand over his stomach. “This is priceless. Who knew you would fuck Ryder.”

“Ryder?” Ashlyn snaps. “You said your name was Ry.”

“I go by Ry,” I say with a careless shrug. “But I’m having problems figuring out how you get Sasha out of Ashlyn.”

“Sasha is the fake name she uses when she meets men at bars,” Conner informs me.

Ashlyn narrows her eyes on his. “Shut the fuck up, Conner. I’m too tired to put up with your shit today,” She yells, her blue eyes narrowed and her hands fisted down by her side. Even exhausted, she still has that same fire in her she had last night when I saved her from the guy at the bar.

“Obviously,” He says, crossing his arms over his chest and looking her up and down. I can’t tell if it’s with disgust or jealousy that she spent the night with me and not him. I tighten my jaw. I don’t like the way he looks at my sister, let alone Ashlyn. “Now we know that it was because you spent the night fucking Ryder.” Her body starts to physically shake with anger, her eyes burning holes into him. “I can’t wait to tell Bradley about this,” he adds.

She lets out a growl as she runs toward him. I quickly move to step in front of her and wrap an arm around her waist, catching her just before she jumps on him. I carry her back into the open bedroom door and kick it closed behind me. Pushing her back, she stumbles before falling onto the bed. She lies there panting and looking up at me with hatred in her blue eyes as I hear my sister and Conner start getting into it.

"That's the second time I've saved you in a matter of twenty-four hours," I say, crossing my arms over my chest as I guard her door. She's not getting out. "I'm guessing this is a common occurrence?"

"Oh, please," she snaps, rolling slowly off the bed. "He's a fucking pussy." She spits the words out, and if I could, I would clap. Finally, someone else feels the same way about him as I do. But that would hurt my sister, so I keep them crossed over my chest.

She huffs as she spins around and walks into her adjoining bathroom. I choose to follow her. She's mumbling profanities as she shoves her shorts down her legs sans underwear. My eyebrows shoot up. "Really? You wanna go another round … is it five or six?" I ask already reaching for my belt. The same belt that I used on her this morning.

Her blue eyes narrow on me, and she lets out a huff. "I'm going to take a shower," she states.

"Want me to join you?" I ask with a charming smile.

"No! I think we've spent enough time together naked!"

I move to stand in front of the white countertop and lean back against it as she pulls her tank top up and over her head. I watch her undress as if we've been doing this for years. She definitely isn't shy, and I figured that out real quick last night. And I love that in a woman. She opens the glass shower door. Stepping in, she turns it on and proceeds to shower. I can clearly see her through the glass door. She steps under the sprayer and leans her head back as she wets her hair. I watch as the water runs over her perfect tits and down her flat stomach …

I clear my throat. "Who's Bradley?" Conner had mentioned him.

She sighs heavily. "It doesn't matter. And why are you still in here?"

I beg to differ and ignore her question. "Boyfriend," I assume.

“I told you last night that I don’t have a boyfriend,” She states as she bends over to pick something up off the floor of the shower. I imagine standing behind her. My hands in her hair and my cock inside her …

I clear my throat again and adjust my tight jeans. “Yes. But you also told me your name was Sasha. So it’s not too far-fetched for me to believe that you lied to me about a boyfriend.”

She shoves open the glass shower door to look me in the eyes. A growl forms deep in my throat as I take in her soaked and amazing body. My eyes focus on her tits; they’re not the biggest I’ve touched nor the smallest. If I had to guess, I’d say a B. Perfect for my hands to squeeze. Both pink nipples hard from the cold air now hitting them. A single drop of water gets my attention as it runs down her flat stomach and continues to her shaved pussy. I lick my lips without thought, wanting to taste her again.

“Bradley is my best friend. Who I fuck!” Just her saying that word makes me think of her begging me to fuck her like she did last night. She squirmed under my touch as I kissed her neck and sucked her breasts. God, I’m hard as a rock. “He is not my boyfriend. I do not have a boyfriend in any way, I assure you.” She then yanks the glass door, slamming it shut again.

I wanna be one of those friends of hers who she allows to use for pleasure. The water shuts off, before she pushes open the door again stepping out. Her blond hair is wet sticking to her chest and shoulders, and I can’t help look over her several times. “Look, about last night. Let’s just forget it. You’re obviously here for Becca, and I don’t want what we did to ruin that.” She stands there dripping wet, and all I can think is *no*. I can’t forget it. Was it that mediocre for her to forget it? If so, I need to prove her wrong. “After all, we had rules,” She reminds me and then walks to the countertop as if she’s dismissing me and my opinion of this situation. I move away to allow her access.

“Rule.” I correct her being; just one night. But as I stand behind her, I’m unable to keep my eyes off her round ass. As the memories of us last night replay in my mind, I know I’m gonna need more than one night. What can I say—I’ve always been a rule breaker.

ASHLYN

I stand in front of *Ry* buck naked and not giving two shits. It's not as if he hasn't already seen every inch of me. I've never been one to be shy in front of anyone anyway.

I brush my teeth and watch him in the bathroom mirror. His eyes are on my ass, my legs, and he checks out my tits in the mirror. And as I watch his eyes darken, I can't help but notice the bulge in his pants. Not even his jeans can hide how hard he is for me. Another round wouldn't be so bad . . .

He presses my back against his hotel door the moment it shuts, I'm already kicking off my shorts. "Rules," I manage to say as his hands rip my tank top up and over my head. Then he's pulling on my bikini strings before it falls to my feet.

"Like a safe word?" He asks as his lips kiss all over my chest eagerly. His hands grab mine and pin them above my head as his lips move to my neck. "How about taco?"

I can't help but laugh at that. "No. Rules."

He stops kissing me and pulls his face away from my neck to look down at me, his hands still pinning mine above my head. "Is this gonna be a list of things you will and won't do?"

I smile. I'll do anything you want to do. Instead, I say, "No. We need to be clear on something."

He nods, taking in a deep breath. "Name it."

I want to be very clear about what we're doing here. That's how shit gets out of hand, and no matter how wet I am right now or how badly he wants me, we need to make sure we're on the same page. "I don't need to know you, and you don't need to know me. This is just sex. Just this one night …"

"Okay." He answers without thought, and then his lips hit mine, but at the last second, he pauses. "You get a rule. I get a question."

"What is it?" I'll answer anything right now.

"Top or bottom?"

I smile. "Either or."

He smiles back. “That was a test, and you passed.” His hands let mine go, and he grabs my ass. Pulling me off my feet, he’s soon carrying me off to his room.

I cannot believe the guy I hooked up with last night and this morning turned out to be Becca’s brother. I mean when I saw him standing in my hotel room, my first thought was that he had followed me back to my room. My second thought was to call the cops, and then when Becca said her brother was here, I wanted to crawl under the bed and hide. I had let her brother fuck me. Then I came back and told her that he was a sex God. She is gonna kill me! And although I love the heat I see in his eyes, and I would love nothing more than for him to put his hand on my back and bend me over this counter …

I take a deep breath. We had a rule. One night only—plus, my friendship with Becca is so much more important to me than some lay. I spit out my toothpaste and rinse my mouth. I turn around and grab a towel off the rod. He reaches out and yanks it out of my hands before I can dry off with it. “Give that to me,” I demand, pushing my hip out.

“Make me,” He says with a smirk on his face. I hate how attractive he is. And I hate that he’s enjoying this so much. He looks like he got twelve hours of sleep, and I still look like shit and am exhausted.

I look down at his jeans and I smile. Reaching out, I grab his hard cock. He hisses in a breath as he leans forward and the towel falls to the floor.

I smile as I bend down to pick it up. “That was cold,” he says, but he’s smiling.

I return it. “I can play dirty.”

“I like dirty,” he says, as his eyes rake over me again; my pussy tightens as his tongue slowly licks his lips. I quickly dry myself off, needing to get out of here. Another minute and I will be begging him to take me. I walk out of the bathroom without looking behind me.

Throwing on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, I storm out of my room to find Becca and Conner still arguing in the living room.

“I’m not gonna apologize, Conner,” she snaps.

“I need to talk to you,” I say, coming to stand between them. Becca looks up at me and it breaks my heart to see the unshed tears in her eyes. She’s trying so hard not to let them fall. She nods her head once and I take her by the hand and then pull her over into her bedroom for us to be alone. After closing the door, I turn to face her. “I’m so sorry, Becca! I had no idea that Ryder was your brother. I mean what are the odds? Just so you know, if I would have known who he was, nothing would have happened between us. And I promise it won’t happen again.”

She stares at me for a few long seconds while I hold my breath. Becca means the world to me. She is not only my best friend but also my sister. And my heart sinks when a tear runs down her cheek. I’ve hurt her and I don’t know what I can possibly do to make it better. “Becca. Please believe me,” I plead as if my life is on the line. “I’m so …”

She bends at the waist as she places her hands on her knees. She cries out and I place my hand on her shoulder. “Becca?” I ask in a panic. Is she okay? Is she having a breakdown?

She snaps upright and I realize that she’s not crying but laughing. Hysterically. “Becca?” Now, I’m even more concerned. What is going on? “Talk to me, Becca.”

She continues to laugh as she reaches up and wipes the tears from her reddened cheeks. “I’m not mad at you.” She shakes her head quickly. “Seriously, it’s okay that you slept with him.”

“What?” I ask confused. “The look on your face when you found out that I had slept with him—”

She cuts me off and surprises me by pulling me in for a hug. I slowly wrap my arms around her and give her a gentle hug, wondering what in the hell is happening. When she pulls back, she has a smile on her face, but a few tears still run down her face. She wipes them off and speaks. “Do you know how many of my friends have slept with my brother?” She doesn’t let me guess. “Several of them. I’m not mad that you did it. I mean I was shocked. Hell, I was in shock that he was in our hotel room. But not mad at you.” She shakes her head. “I do think it’s gross that you find him attractive.” She nods her head quickly, and it makes me smile. “But not mad

at you. You're my best friend, Ash. I would never let a man come between our friendship. Not even my brother."

This time, I pull her in for a hug. "Why were you crying out there?" I still ask concerned for her.

She pulls away from me. Her smile fades, and her face falls as she lets out a long sigh. "It's just … Conner," she whispers. "He is mad that Ryder is here."

"Why?"

"They don't get along. Actually, they hate one another." She runs a hand through her dark hair. "And then last night …" She stops herself.

I let out a sigh. "What happened?" I ask; clearly, I missed something. He was an ass when we were all in the living room, but that's nothing new.

She just shakes her head. I know she doesn't wanna talk about it, so I let the subject go. For now.

I place a hand on her shoulder. "It will all be okay. Your big brother is here, and we're in Panama City." I place my arms out wide. "What could go wrong?"

***

We make our way down to the first floor to have breakfast at the complimentary buffet. Thankfully, things aren't awkward between Ryder and me. I truly believe that Becca doesn't care that I slept with him, but I can feel the tension between Conner and Becca. And so can Ryder. He keeps looking at Conner like he wants to punch his lights out. While in the elevator, I wanted to grab Conner from behind and hold him still to give Ryder the advantage to beat the shit out of him. Even though I have no doubt Ryder wouldn't need the help. He outweighs him in muscle and in height.

Ryder and Becca talk as we make our way through the buffet line. He tells her all about New York and about how their parents are doing, which is mainly about their father. Ryder seems as close to their mother as Becca is. I catch Conner giving him death glares that I know Ryder can feel, but at

this very moment, he's ignoring him. His sister is the center of his attention. I think it's sweet that he came all this way just to surprise her.

I set my plate down. Looking away from Conner, I pull my phone out of my back pocket when I feel it vibrate.

Brad: *You still alive?*

Me: *Yes. Sorry about that.* I text Bradley. I never did text him back last night.

He responds as I sit down at the table Ryder has picked for us.

Brad: *It's okay. I know you're partying your ass off. But you can deliver your apology on your knees when you get back.*

Typical man.

Me: *Is there any other way?* I joke.

Brad: *Damn, I wish every woman thought as dirty as you did.*

Me: *What can I say? I'm one of a kind.*

Brad: *And that is why you're my best friend. Call me later.*

I place my phone on the table next to my plate and start to eat my scrambled eggs as I watch Becca get up from the table. "Where's she going?" I ask no one in particular. We just sat down …

"She forgot ketchup," Ryder answers me.

Before I can say anything, Conner speaks. "Was that Bradley you were talking to?"

I roll my eyes. "That's none of your business." I turn my head to glare at him. Of course, the bastard sat down next to me. For as much as he hates

me, he sure does like to aggravate me.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” He places his hand on his chest in an act of sincerity. “I was under the impression that you liked to make your sexcapades public knowledge.” He looks over at Ryder; this time, a smile on his face.

“Watch it!” Ryder warns Conner with a growl.

I let out a long sigh and then snap. “I’m really getting tired of your shit, Conner.”

“Maybe I’m tired of hearing about you being a fucking whore,” he snaps back.

“Conner …” Ryder stands quickly from his chair; it squeals as it moves against the floor.

“Ryder!” I look up at him and shake my head. “He’s not worth it,” I tell him before looking back at Conner.

“You won’t touch me anyway,” Conner spits at Ryder, ignoring me. “You wouldn’t wanna hurt the princess.” Geez, Conner is usually an ass, but he’s taking it to the extreme today. What in the hell happened last night between him and Becca that I missed?

Ryder moves away from the table and starts to walk around. I look around quickly. Shit! I can’t let Ryder touch Conner. As much as I would love to see it, that would crush Becca and she’s already upset as it is. Before shit throws down right here in front of everyone, I make a quick decision before Ryder does something that he regrets. I mean besides me.

I grab my glass of iced tea and dump it in Conner’s lap. “What the fuck…?”

He stands from his chair. Arms out wide, he hangs his mouth open in shock. Ryder comes to a halt. Still on his side of the table, he’s out of arm’s reach.

“Aww, you peed your pants,” I say as I watch his khaki shorts soak up all my tea. “You should go and take care of that.”

He growls as he now stares down at me. His black eyes narrow to the point I can barely see them; he’s so pissed. He sucks in a breath through gritted teeth. “Do what she says, Conner,” Ryder orders.

He looks up at Ryder. “What? She opened her legs for you last night and now, all of a sudden, you’re her bitch boy?”

Where is Becca? Maybe she got lost. I have a feeling my ice tea trick isn’t gonna be a big enough deterrent to keep Ryder from kicking his ass. “No! But she is my sister’s best friend and I will defend her however I damn well please,” Ryder answers.

Aww, that’s sweet. He’s pretty sexy all worked up. His dark green eyes are simmering and his hands fisted down by his side make the muscles in his arms bulge. His white t-shirt pulls against his hard chest. I bite my bottom lip as I try to hide my smile. *Beat his ass, Ry!* It’ll turn me on.

I stare back and forth between the two of them as they breathe heavily and are ready to pounce at any second. Finally, Conner breaks the silence. “Fuck this shit.” Then he storms off.

Ryder sits back down with a heavy sigh and I can’t help the smile on my face as I take another bite of my eggs. He runs a hand through his dark spiked hair. He looks uneasy, but after a few seconds, he chuckles. “Nice one with the ice tea.”

My tense body relaxes at the sound. “I thought so,” I say, lifting my head up and giving him a wink. He just shakes his head with a smile on his face and then looks back down at his plate to continue eating his pancakes.

“Where did Conner go?”

We both look up to see Becca sitting down with a frown on her face. “He peed his pants,” I say with a shrug as if I don’t know how that’s possible.

“Yep,” Ryder agrees. “He had to go back up to the room to change.”

She looks back and forth between us for a few seconds and then pops the ketchup bottle open and starts to drench her eggs in it. Ryder and I exchange another look across the table. We both know what she’s doing. Conner will fill her in when he gets back. And my victory will be short-lived ‘cause I know it’s just gonna cause another fight between them. Fuck, have I mentioned how much I hate this guy?

A cell phone starts to ring, and Ryder shifts in his seat and pulls it out of his jeans pocket. “Hey, man.” Pause. “Yeah, we’re down here eating

breakfast.” Another pause. “Okay. See you in a minute.” He hangs up his phone and places it back in his pocket.

“Who is here with you?” Becca asks slowly.

I frown over at her as she awaits Ryder’s answer.

“Jaycent came with me,” he says, not looking up from his plate and shoving a piece of bacon in his mouth.

Becca’s eyes bug out and her lips part. I swear I hear her gasp. I open my mouth to ask her what’s wrong when her eyes meet mine. She very slowly shakes her head at me and then looks back down at her food. *What in the hell was that about?* Another asshole maybe? Just my luck.

We spend the next several minutes in silence as we eat our food. And it’s actually a nice change. But it’s quickly disturbed when a man, who I’m guessing is Jaycent, walks up to the table. “Hello, everyone!” he says with a smile on his face. He wears a white t-shirt like Ryder but has on a pair of gray shorts.

I raise my hand and give him a wave. “Hey,” I say lamely to a guy I don’t know.

Becca actually stands and he pulls her in for a tight hug. Okay, maybe he’s not a prick. “How have you been, gorgeous?” he asks, and her cheeks turn as red as the ketchup that covers her eggs.

“Watch it!” Ryder orders, but there’s no threat in his voice, and a smile covers his face.

I can’t help but stare at Jaycent and Becca. She’s watching every move he makes, and I can see why; the guy is hot. Broad shoulders, dark hair, and light brown eyes. He could actually pass as Ryder’s brother. That makes it even hotter. Well, since I’m not related to either one of them.

“What happened to you last night, man?” He slaps Ryder on the back as he sits down beside him. “We were supposed to go to the pier for that concert. You just took off and never returned. Then when I got back to the room this morning, I saw your shirt by the front door and your pants in the hallway. So spill, how hot was she?”

I place a hand over my mouth as I choke on a piece of my pancake from his questions. Everyone turns to stare at me. I point at my neck. “Sorry.” I

wave a hand in the air as I choke some more. Tears start to sting my eyes. “Something was stuck in my throat.”

My eyes lock on Ryder, and he mouths *my cock*, referring to last night. If I still had my sweet tea, I would throw it at him right now. “Here. Have some of my water.” He places his water in front of my plate, and I greedily take a gulp. I pat my chest as it burns going down.

“So …” Becca starts to speak but Jaycent interrupts her.

“Come on. I wanna know who she was? Gonna meet up with her later?” He wiggles his eyebrows.

Ryder and Becca are staring at me, and I start to break out in hives. Shit! This is gonna follow me around for a while. I take a deep breath. “Let me get you up to speed.” Jaycent looks at me, his brown eyes full of confusion. “I was the one who Ryder slept with last night.” His eyes widen, and his eyebrows shoot to his hairline. “We had no idea who the other was. And well, you know the rest.”

“Oh.” He draws out the two letters.

I nod and cram another piece of pancake in my mouth. Can this day get any more humiliating? I wanna crawl under the table.

“So what are our plans today?” Becca asks, putting a smile on her face and trying to get over the awkwardness. Ryder stares at me with a look I can’t quite explain. His eyes watch me intently, but his face lacks any emotion. *What are you thinking?*

I look away from him and towards Becca. “I don’t know about all of you, but I am going back up to the room and taking a very long afternoon nap.”

“Long night?” Ryder asks, the corner of his lips arching slowly.

Opening my mouth to comment, I realize I have nothing to say. It was a long night. He winks at me, and my panties instantly get wet. His cockiness is a turn-on.

Thankfully, Jaycent saves me. “What have you been up to, Becca?” he asks her with a smile. I watch a blush creep up her cheeks and a smile form on her face. One of those *oh God, he just talked to me* smiles. I quickly look at Ryder, but he’s oblivious to it as his attention is now back on his breakfast. He continues to cram bacon in his mouth. Have they had a thing?

Does she want to have a thing with him? I've known the guy for three minutes and already like him more than Conner.

"Just work and school," she responds as if her life is as simple as can be. Yeah, right.

"Congratulations on graduation, by the way," he tells her with a proud smile.

"Thank you. I'm so ready to get back to New York," she says before taking a drink.

His dark eyes light up with excitement, and my frown deepens. What is up with these two? "You coming home for the summer?" Did his voice sound hopeful, or is that just me making a mountain out of a molehill?

Her eyes shoot to Ryder. "You haven't told him?" she asks surprised.

"Told me what?" Jaycent also asks, turning to face him.

"I told you, dude," Ryder answers. "She was moving back to New York after graduation." Jaycent starts to shake his head quickly. "Yes, I did. I told you the moment she told me. We were at your house. Some chick was over." He waves a hand in the air as if her name isn't that important.

"Oh," Jaycent says softly then looks back at her. "Well, that's awesome!"

Another awkward silence falls on the table, and I wonder what the people who are sitting at the table behind us think. We seem to have many surprises today.

"Conner's here," Ryder announces to Jaycent.

His shoulders tense, and his mouth sets in a hard line. "What? Why?" Jaycent demands.

Ryder shrugs a shoulder. "They're back together," he admits grimly.

Jaycent shakes his head before grabbing a piece of bacon off Ryder's plate, obviously not having much to say on that matter. Becca just hangs her head and pushes her food around on her plate. I have never been more confused than I am right now.

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CHAPTER SIX

RYDER

“What do you want to do today?” my sister asks me, trying to steer the subject away from her and Conner as she looks up from her food. “We can do whatever you want to do.”

“Why does he get to choose?” the sexy blonde across from me asks with a frown.

“It’s his birthday!” Becca responds excitedly.

“Oh,” she says in surprise. Her eyes slowly find mine. “Well, happy birthday.”

I smile as I get a thought. “What are you gonna get me?” I ask Ashlyn.

“Nothing,” she responds simply.

I keep my face blank. “Technically, you already gave me something.” Her eyes narrow on me. “Last night and this morning …”

“Shut up!” she hisses before looking over at Becca. But she’s ignoring us as she looks around the hotel, probably looking for dipshit.

Jaycent chuckles. “Good one,” he mumbles more to himself than to me.

“I need to find a bakery in town,” Becca says, apparently not listening to our conversation.

“For what?” Ashlyn asks. “Having a sweet craving?”

Becca shakes her head once. “No. I need to get Ryder a cake.”

I place my hands up as I shake my head at her. “I don’t need a cake, sis.” Our family has never been big on celebrating birthdays. We try to get together for dinner here and there, but if we do, they’re never on the actual birthday. It’s whenever Dad could fit it into his work schedule. Once we celebrated my mother’s birthday two weeks after it had passed. The older we got, the longer we waited. But honestly, it never bothers my mom or me. She has her life, and I have mine. But Becca? She just didn’t understand it.

“It’s your special day, Ry. You need cake on your special day,” she says softly.

I’m seven years older than Becca is. She’s been calling me Ry for as long as I can remember because Ry was much easier for her to say when she was little. I give her a sweet smile. It’s so nice to be here with her. She looks so much older than I remember her. Last time I saw her, she was graduating high school. She still seemed so young then. Even though her hair is longer and her eyes greener now, it still feels like old times. I’ve missed her so much. “I don’t want a cake.”

“Watching your carbs?” Ashlyn asks sarcastically.

I chuckle. “No. I’m just not a big fan of cake.”

“We’ll get you cheesecake. Or an ice-cream cake,” my sister adds. “Whatever you want.”

I look over at Ashlyn. *Hmm, whatever I want.* I wouldn’t mind her naked on my bed again and a can of icing. Yeah, that’s my idea of having cake.

“I don’t understand,” Ashlyn says as her light brown eyebrows pull together. “If today is your brother’s birthday, then why didn’t we go to New York for you to see him on our vacation instead of us coming to Florida?” she asks Becca.

Becca goes to speak, but I answer her question. “Becca called me a few months back and said she wanted to come to New York the weekend of my birthday, but I was scheduled to be out of town at the time for business. When I had spoken to her the following week, she informed me that she was coming to Panama City with her roommate instead since I would be out of town. So when my business trip got canceled two weeks ago, I decided to surprise her here,” I say, spreading my arms out wide.

“And what a surprise it was,” Becca says with a big smile. Ashlyn slowly nods her head in understanding.

“How long have you guys been friends?” Jaycent asks Ashlyn as he points his index finger between her and my sister.

“Four years,” she answers him.

He tilts his head to the side and drops his hand as he asks. “And you slept with Ryder last night? Her brother.” Ashlyn’s face pales at that. “But didn’t

realize he was her brother until this morning? How is that possible?”

She sighs heavily as if sleeping with me was the worst decision she’s ever made. I smile, sitting back in my chair, because I know I’m gonna have her repeat that mistake. Over and over ... “She talks about Ryder a lot, and she has pictures of him in her room, but they are mostly from when they were younger. I mean one of them is a picture of him and her from like ten years ago. He has a bowl cut and sunglasses on as they stand outside in what looks like a park,” she explains. Jaycent laughs at her saying I had a bowl cut, and I roll my eyes. We all have those pictures that if we could go back and change our style, we would. “I didn’t recognize him in the least when I met him last night. He was wearing a hat, sunglasses, and had facial hair.” She frowns as she looks at my face now, and I wonder if she liked me better with it than without. “Plus, he said his name was Ry not Ryder.”

“I haven’t even seen Ryder in four years,” Becca chimes in. “The most recent picture I have of him was four years ago at my high school graduation. And he’s changed a lot since then as well.”

“Plus, it’s not like I paid attention to his pictures,” Ashlyn says with a careless shrug.

“You paid attention to me last night,” I add. She practically threw herself at me. She narrows her sexy eyes and thins her lips at that. “The truth hurts,” I add. Jaycent just laughs.

“And it’s not like he has any social media pages for me to follow or to grab current photos from,” Becca says, looking at me. “You really need to join the world and get with social media, Ry.”

I shrug. “That shit is nothing but drama.”

“Oh.” Ashlyn places her elbows on the table and locks her fingers together as she smiles at me. “Sounds like you’re talking from experience.”

“He is,” Jaycent answers with a nod. He takes another piece of bacon from my plate, and I shove his hand away. “He pisses off women, and then they go and try to get even—”

“Let’s not talk about Ry’s love life at the moment,” Becca interrupts him. She shivers as if the thought of me and her friend are still fresh in her mind.

I see Ashlyn cringe at her words. “I wanna get back to planning your birthday today.”

“We don’t need to do anything for it,” I tell her.

She waves that off. “How about we go out tonight and hit the bars to celebrate.”

“It’s supposed to pour down rain today and tonight,” Jaycent informs us.

“Really? I thought it looked cloudy outside.” She pouts.

“We can stay in,” I offer. “Have a party up in our room.” If you ask me, that would be better than any club here in Panama City. Clubs are loud and full of people. I haven’t seen my sister in four years. I’d much rather sit up in our hotel room and actually get to talk to her without some drunk running into us or having to scream at the top of my lungs.

“That’s fine with me. You okay with that, Ash?”

She nods. “Sure.”

I smile. I feel another round of her and me naked coming on.

“Fuck!” The smile drops off my face when Conner plops back down in his seat wearing a new pair of shorts. “That elevator takes forever,” he whines.

“Why did you go back up to the room?” Becca asks him as she puts her hand on his shoulder. He shrugs it off.

“I told you he peed his pants,” Ashlyn answers.

Conner looks over at Ashlyn. I’ve never seen him so pissed in all the eight years he’s been dating my sister. She just smiles at him sweetly. It sounds like he actually growls as he fists his hands on the table. I’m about to reach across it and grab him by the shirt because he looks like he’s about to pounce on her, but Jaycent speaks.

“Conner.”

He whips his head back across the table, and his face goes as white as a ghost, his shoulders fall, and his hands unclench. “Jaycent.” His voice actually squeals, and Ashlyn can’t cover her laugh fast enough.

“I’m surprised to see you here,” Jaycent declares as he sits back in his seat.

Conner clears his throat and shrugs his shoulders. *He's nervous.* He should be. Jaycent will take him out without a second thought. The bastard was right earlier; if I touch him, it will upset my sister. But I won't let him disrespect Ashlyn or Becca either. He knows Jaycent doesn't give two shits if Becca gets mad at him for beating his ass. "Me too," Conner says with a little edge to his voice as the shock begins to wear off.

Ashlyn covers her mouth as she yawns. "I need some coffee." She stands.

"I'll get it." I stand and Conner snorts. Ignoring him, I ask her. "How do you like it?"

"Black. Like her soul," Conner remarks.

Ashlyn lets out a long sigh as if she's trying to calm herself then gives me a tight smile. "Thanks. But I can get it." I'm about to argue, but she turns and walks away from our table. I watch her walk away with last night and this morning still fresh on my mind.

***

After we had finished breakfast, Jaycent and I went back up to our hotel room, and the girls returned to theirs with a sulking Conner. We planned to meet up in an hour. My sister still needed to shower, and Ashlyn needed a nap. I took some pride in that, knowing it was my fault she was so tired. Even after a cup of coffee.

"What the hell is up with your sister, Ryder?" Jaycent asks the moment we enter our suite. "I thought she dumped that loser?"

I sigh. "I'm not sure what is going on there," I say in all honesty. "But I don't hold much faith in them staying together long. They break up and get back together all the time." I haven't liked him since they got together the beginning of her freshman year in high school. I met him for the first time that year when I came home for Christmas from college. I almost killed the bastard then.

He nods his head as he goes to walk off to his room but stops and turns to face me. "By the way. Ashlyn. Good job!"

I go to speak, but my phone rings. I pick it up when I see it's my mother. My muscles tense as I answer. "Hello?"

"Hello, Julian." She calls me by my first name, and my teeth clench. She's the only one who calls me that, and she knows I hate it. She just doesn't give a fuck!

"Mother," I say tightly.

"I'm having lunch with Vicki, and she brought up the Christmas Gala. She had mentioned that she was free, and I told her that I know you don't have a date for it."

It's only May. "Mother—" I growl.

"You know that you look better with a woman on your arm." She interrupts me. "And her father is hosting it with Timothy." She also calls my father by his first name. "Both companies would do well with the publicity."

She always does this. This is how she thinks. She isn't as committed to my father's company as he is, but if it doesn't do well, then she doesn't get all the perks of being married to a billionaire. She's just as money hungry as he is; she just prefers to spend it instead of working to make it. "You mean to stage a fake relationship," I say, already shaking my head.

She laughs as if I'm funny. *It's fake.* Everything about her is fake. "It doesn't have to be fake." I can almost hear her rolling her eyes. "She is perfect for you—"

"Stop, Mother," I say, pinching the bridge of my nose. It's too early to fight with her.

"One second," she says, and I sigh. I know exactly what she's doing.

"Ryder," comes the voice that makes me feel like I'm running my nails down a chalkboard. It literally gives me a headache every time I hear it. Which is why I avoid it. "Happy birthday," Vicki says with a sigh as if she misses me. I don't miss her.

"Thank you," I say dryly.

She laughs lightly like I'm funny. "I came by to see you this morning, but your doorman said you were out of town." I can hear the disappointment in her voice. "I called your mother, and she suggested we have lunch instead."

Of course, she did. A silence falls over the phone as if she's waiting for me to tell her where I'm at. I don't. My mother doesn't even know where I'm at. My father knows where I am, but she'd have to actually speak to him in order to get that information.

"Well, I'll let you talk to your mother again," she finally says. "Happy birthday."

Moments later, I hear my mother's voice. "So we're good for the gala?" she asks. Still no mention of my birthday.

"No. We're not good," I say, and I hear her small intake of breath. "Quit trying to set me up, Mother. I can get a date." Then I hang up. We rarely say goodbye and never say I love you. I only use that word with Becca. She's the only one who truly deserves it.

I place my phone in my pocket, completely forgetting about my mother and that entire conversation. I don't give her any more time than she deserves.

I look out the living room windows and frown when I see it's now raining cats and dogs outside. "Well, so much for going out and sightseeing today," I say although I really couldn't care less.

"Yeah, just our luck, huh?" Jaycent asks as he sits on the couch, flipping through the channels. He doesn't mention the call with my Mother. He knows all too well where she and I stand. "The only good thing is that we're in a five-star resort with a full bar and kitchen. So we can drink all we want, and if we don't wanna cook, we can order room service." As he finishes speaking, he brings a bottle of beer to his lips to take a drink.

"True," I mutter, going into our kitchen and opening the fridge. That's the other best thing about getting the penthouse suite. It's like a home away from home. Literally. The spacious kitchen overlooks part of the living room and half the dining room. If I look straight ahead, I see nothing but floor-to-ceiling windows that usually showcase the ocean, but right now, I just see the dark clouds and rain. It's beautiful, really. I have always loved the ocean and have even been debating on buying a beach house for a couple of years now. Although I don't want one in a popular area. I would

much rather it be secluded. Yeah, that is a dream of mine. Someday, it will become a reality.

A knock on our door gets my attention. I go and open it to see my sister standing there with an annoyed Conner. “Come in,” I say, moving aside. I shut the door and pause as I ask, “Where’s Ashlyn?”

“Don’t you mean Sasha?” Conner says, and I clench my jaw. *Annoying little shit!*

“She’s still asleep,” my sister answers, ignoring him before she goes and plops down on the couch. “I went to tell her we were heading up here, and she said she’d be up later.”

I watch my sister and Conner sit next to one another on one of the couches. I can tell Conner isn’t happy. His lips are in a thin line, and his eyes are narrowed in anger. I couldn’t help but laugh at what Ashlyn did this morning at breakfast. I find it refreshing when a woman takes up for herself. Even though I’ve had to save her from actually getting her ass kicked twice already, she doesn’t hold anything back.

“Want a beer, Conner?” I ask, trying to be nice to the guy. If we’re gonna be cooped up together all day, we might as well try to get along.

Without answering, he gets up from the couch and walks over to the kitchen. I hand him a beer. He yanks it from my hand and doesn’t even bother to thank me. *I should have spit in it.*

“Sis? What would you like to drink?” I ask, drilling holes into the back of Conner’s head as he goes to sit back down with her. He didn’t even bother to wait in the kitchen to take her something. Being nice to him will be harder than I thought. In an odd way, they remind me of my parents. But Conner is my mother. The uptight and moody one. My father isn’t the best husband, but he never disrespects my mother. He just chooses the one thing that has never let him down—his career.

“I’ll take a water,” she says, answering my question. I grab her one and take it over to her before she can get up. She smiles and thanks me.

I plop down on an oversized brown chair and sink into the material with a sigh. “So how are things going in Seattle?” I ask her. “Only one more week there.”

“I bet you’re ready to leave that gloomy city,” Jaycent says before taking one last drink to finish off his beer and then getting up to head to the kitchen.

She shrugs. “I like it there.”

“Fucking hate that city!” Conner speaks as if we asked him his opinion. “It rains every day!” He looks toward the windows that overlook the ocean. Still nothing but rain. “If I wanted to be holed up in a living room all day, we could have just stayed there,” he declares, looking back at her.

I watch her sigh deeply. She must feel me watching her ‘cause she looks over at me and gives me a small smile. “Well, I’m glad you like it there, but it’s gonna be awesome to have you back in New York. Especially since you’ll be in the same building as I am.”

A glass breaks in the kitchen followed by Jaycent’s voice. “Dammit!” His head pops up from over the kitchen counter. “I’m okay. Just dropped my beer,” he announces.

“I know,” she answers, ignoring him. “It’s gonna be like old times again.” My father bought her an apartment in the same building as mine for her graduation present. I think it was his way of telling her it was time to come home. He has always supported her dreams, even if she changed them five times, but he would never actually admit that he hated she went off to college. My mother, on the other hand, gives her opinion on the matter all the time. She felt her baby should have never left home. She thinks that since we are well off, Becca didn’t need to attend college since she never went herself. But Becca is nothing like her.

“And it’s gonna be even better since it will be the three of us.”

Anger sets in as I tighten my hand around my beer bottle. “Three of us?” There’s no way in hell my father will allow Conner to move in with her. He’s not stupid. He knows they have sex. Hell, they live together in Seattle. But my father doesn’t pay for her place in Seattle, and he would never buy her an apartment and allow him to live there and not pay a dime. My father is all for women making a living for themselves and having a career, but he’s also old school. Men work and make a living to support their family.

But real men don’t just lie around and live off another man. My father and I both fear that has been his plan with her all along.

“Ashlyn. She’s coming with me.”

All anger fades, and I find myself grinning like a fool. So little Miss Priss will be living in the same building as I do. You know how easy that will make it when I wanna get lucky? All I’ll have to do is have her come on up.

I mean it’s not as if it’s hard for me to get a piece of ass. I have friends like Ashlyn was talking about. The ones you hook up with and then just hang out with. But to have one right there. And well, Ashlyn was like a fucking high. As soon as we would finish, I was already ready for another round. She couldn’t keep her hands off me. While most women are soft and sensual, she was rough and needy, and I liked it. She’s not the only one who has physical reminders of what we did last night. Mine just aren’t as visible. I have marks down my back from her nails. Bite marks on my chest and hips. She was wild. *Fuck*. Now, I’m hard.

Reaching behind me, I grab the decorative off-white throw pillow from the chair I’m sitting on and place it on my lap. Maybe I should take another shower.

ASHLYN

When I wake this time, I feel more rested than I did earlier. I also notice that my room is dark. I frown as I rub my eyes. How long have I been asleep? Picking up my phone next to me, I squint when my screen lights up. It takes a few seconds for my eyes to focus, and once they do, I sit straight up. “Shit!” I’ve slept most of the day away. It’s past four o’clock.

Looking back over at the large window, I realize why I slept for so long. The rain reminds me of home and makes me sleep like the dead. I open my messages and see I have a few from Becca. One is telling me that they went on up to Ryder’s penthouse suite. And the other ones have been over the last couple of hours, asking where in the hell I’m at and to hurry my ass up there.

I throw off the massive down comforter and crawl out of bed. I make my way to the bathroom and look at myself in the mirror. My hair is a crazy, curly mess. I had just thrown it in a ponytail wet when we went down for breakfast this morning and then removed it when I went back to take a nap. So now, it has air-dried, and it is wavy as hell. I flip my head over and put it up in a messy bun on top of my head. A few loose pieces fall to the side, and I just leave them there. There is no use in trying to fix it, unless I wash it again, and then dry and straighten it. I'm not in the mood to take that long to get ready.

Walking back into the bedroom, I dig through my unorganized suitcase, throwing things out of it here and there until I find my white Pink sweatpants. I pull them up and tie the pink drawstring. I then find my white sports bra that zips up the front. I go back to digging through my cluttered bag to find a Pink tank top. After placing that on, I put on a lightweight jacket that matches. I have an obsession for Victoria's Secret. Like it's really, really bad. If they ever start selling heels … well, let's just say I'll have to get a second job.

I top off my *I don't give a fuck* look with some mascara and nude lip-gloss and walk out of the hotel room.

I send a text to Bradley as I'm in the elevator on my way up to Ryder and Jaycent's room. He had text me earlier while I was sleeping to ask how things were going with the douche. I gladly tell him about him having an accident. I'm laughing at the memory when Ryder opens his door for me to enter.

"What's so funny?" he asks.

"Just reminiscing," I singsong.

I watch his eyes sweep me over and then a smug smile appears on his face. "Me too."

I roll my eyes as I walk over to their couch. "Where have you been? You missed like six episodes of *The Walking Dead*," Becca informs me.

I plop down and sit cross-legged on the couch. "Oh, please. Like we haven't seen every episode a hundred times." Okay, so maybe a hundred is an exaggeration, but it's been a lot. "Why are you drinking water?" I ask as

I spot her water bottle in her lap. “We’re on vacation. We’re supposed to be drinking—” My words are cut short when Ryder stands in front of me, offering me a beer.

“Alcohol?” he finishes with that smug smile still on his gorgeous face. I’ll give it to him; the guy is even hotter today than he was last night. His plain white t-shirt hugs his muscular arms and large chest. His jeans sit low on his hips, and I can’t help but notice he’s wearing the same belt that left marks on my arms this morning. I swallow as my body starts to heat up.

“Thank you,” I say, taking it. I tip it up to my lips and take a sip.

“Becca isn’t much of a drinker,” he then adds as he sits in a big chair.

I laugh. “That’s what you think.”

He looks over at her. “What? Now you drink? You used to get on to me all the time about drinking.” He looks at me. “Our parents were out of town one week. It was like the one time my father took off work to take our mom on vacation alone.” He takes a quick drink of his beer. “We couldn’t go because we had school.”

“You couldn’t miss school because you were failing,” Becca says. “Don’t tell the story and change parts.” She laughs.

“I wasn’t changing it. And I was failing because I had been suspended earlier that semester.” He waves his hand in the air. “Anyway, we are off topic. They went out of town, and we stayed behind. They put me in charge of taking care of Becca and making sure she made it to and from school. Well, I was so proud of myself that I wanted to celebrate by throwing a party that weekend. My sister said she promised she could keep a secret, but the moment our parents walked in the door, she squealed like a banshee.” He gives her a glare.

She starts laughing and places her hand up. “In my defense, I had to.” She looks over at me. “The maids didn’t clean up everything.”

“I think they did that on purpose,” Ryder mumbles.

“Some drunk chick that my brother was sleeping with ended up puking all over my bedroom.”

“Ewww,” I say grossed out. “You didn’t make her clean it up?” I look at him.

He just shrugs. “I didn’t know she had done it. I never went into my sister’s room.” He narrows his eyes on Becca. “And Becca didn’t even mention it until our parents came home.” I can tell from the sparkle in his eyes that he’s just messing with her. “Anyway, Mom and Dad were pissed, and I got in big shit. All Becca did was talk about how bad alcohol was and that I should cut back. How she was never gonna drink when she got older.” He rolls his eyes.

“I was eleven.” She looks over at me. “But that party was awesome,” she says with a sigh, looking into the distance as if she’s reminiscing. I follow her eyes and see that they are on Jaycent, who stands over by a bedroom door while texting on his phone. I’ll have to remember to ask her what in the hell is with her and him when we get back to Seattle and Conner isn’t around. Speaking of Conner ...

“I hate to even ask, but where is Conner?” I’m afraid just mentioning his name will summon him.

“His father called. So he went out into the hallway to talk to him,” Becca answers.

I frown. “He wasn’t out there when I got off the elevator.” Ryder and Jaycent have the penthouse suite. There’s only one very short hallway before you arrive at their hotel door.

She jumps up off the couch and storms to the hotel door, pulling her cell out of the back pocket of her skinny jeans to no doubt start blowing up his phone.

“Are they always this way?” Ryder asks me.

“Yep,” I say, lifting the bottle to my lips and keeping my eyes on the muted TV.

An hour later, we are still sitting in the same seat and haven’t spoken another word. Jaycent eventually sat down, but his phone has consumed his attention. I’m guessing a woman. Nothing else could keep a man’s attention for that long, and for the first time since I met him, I wonder if he has a girlfriend.

I look down at my empty beer bottle and get up from the couch. I dump it in the trash and then open the fridge. I’m bent over at the waist when I hear

Ryder behind me. “What are you looking for?”

“Something other than beer,” I say, not turning around. The fridge is fully stocked with food, but I want something a little stronger than beer.

I reach out and grab a jar of pickles that look awfully delicious. He sidesteps me with a raised brow as I place the jar on the counter. I twist it open and take one out. I take one of the fat dill pickles and bite the tip of it.

He stares at me with heated dark green eyes. I take another bite, a bigger one this time, pushing it in deeper than the first time. Teasing him. “Enjoy having big things in your mouth?” He smirks, referring to how I woke him up this morning.

“Too bad I’m always left disappointed.”

The smile drops off his face, and he takes a step towards me. I don’t move. Even if the counter wasn’t behind me, I wouldn’t back down. I like fucking with him. I also like him fucking me. “Two words. Sex. God.” He repeats what I told Becca.

I roll my eyes as if that’s ridiculous. “Women have to exaggerate to their friends. Just like when a woman fakes an orgasm,” I say simply. “They go hand in hand.”

He snorts. “You weren’t faking anything with me, baby.”

“Guess you’ll never know,” I say, tilting my head to the side with a sly smile. “We made a rule; one night. I don’t plan to break it.”

He reaches out, wrapping an arm around my waist, and yanks me toward him. I suck in a deep breath when I feel his hard cock pressing into my lower belly. *Don’t think about it, Ashlyn.* “Oh, I know.” He lowers his head to my ear and whispers, “I like how you dressed up for me.” His free hand also comes around; his large hand covers my ass cheek and squeezes. Hard. A shiver runs through me. “But it doesn’t matter what you wear because I know what you have to offer.” He thinks I dressed like to this to appear unattractive. Typical guy. Thinks everything we do is for them … *Oh.* He starts trailing kisses down my neck. “I know you had every intention of leaving this morning and never seeing me again, but I have a confession to make.” Both his hands leave my body. His eyes meet mine as he reaches up and unzips my jacket. The heat in them makes my legs weak and my pussy

wet. Once opened, he pushes it off my shoulders, and it falls to the floor. “I wanted to have you at my mercy again.”

My breath hitches when he places his hand on my waist under my tank top. His eyes drop to my parted lips as his hand works its way up my stomach. My heart pounds in my chest as I try to stay upright. My legs are on the verge of buckling.

“You’re breathing heavy.” His eyes connect with mine again, and his lips twitch. “Just my touch has your heart racing.” He manages to squeeze his large hand beneath the bottom of my sports bra, and he cups my breast. He lowers his face to mine. “Tell me again how disappointed you were.”

I lick my lips. “Extremely.” The word came out as a whimper. *Walk away.* His hand inches up a little more, and he takes my hard nipple between his two fingers. *Come on, pull away,* I tell myself, but I’m unable to move my legs. He pinches it hard, and I gasp from the jolt it sends straight to my core.

“Right.” He draws the word out, and I reach out to pull him closer.

“Okay,” I say breathlessly. What can one more time hurt? Becca already told me she didn’t care that I slept with him. And there really was no faking with him.

I’m so weak!

“Okay, what?” His other hand slides up my back then he grabs my messy bun. He pulls my head back, and I find myself looking up at the kitchen ceiling. “Okay, what?” he repeats, placing two more kisses on my neck.

I swallow. “I’ll give you another chance.” I sound like I’m gonna come right now; I’m so breathless.

He chuckles, and it makes my body shake. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?” Then his lips are on mine.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

RYDER

Of course, she gave in.

She parts her lips, and I slide my tongue into her mouth as I wrap one arm around her while the other continues to massage her breast. She moans, and it causes me to become more aggressive. I kiss her fearlessly. Deeply. She stands limp in my arms, and I swallow all of her moans and whimpers. I can taste her desire for me. And I can feel the heat radiating from her body. In a way, I knew one night with this woman wasn't gonna be enough for me.

She grinds her hips into my achingly hard cock, and I fight with everything I have to keep from yanking her sweatpants down and sliding my dick into her right here and now.

I gotta play this one smart. She really did not intend to let me touch her again because of who my sister is. Last night was different—she was ready and willing. I'm not saying she's not willing now, but ever since she figured out I'm her best friend's brother, she's made it very clear that nothing was gonna happen again. So I had to pursue her. Now, I have to remind her how amazing it felt to be under me. Then I'm gonna have to leave her wanting more. *Always give them a reason to come back.* Which is crazy of me, since I usually don't want them coming back. Should I really do this with her? She is my sister's best friend and about to move into my building. What if she wants more when I'm ready to stop?

I pull away and look down at her. Her lips are swollen and wet and eyes closed while she's gasping for air. It reminds me of last night. Yeah, I'm willing to take that chance.

A bang on the door has her eyes springing open and her yanking away from me. She reaches down and picks up her jacket to cover herself while

she tries to recover from that kiss.

Leaving her, I go to open the door. My sister comes in just as fast as she stormed out. “God, I hate him!” she shouts.

“What happened?” Ashlyn asks her, coming from the kitchen to her friend’s side. Anything she felt for me seconds ago is now gone.

“I found him downstairs at the bar,” she cries into her hands. “I asked him to come up here, and he said he didn’t want to.” She sniffs. “I said I don’t get to see my brother very often. And his argument was that after next week, I will be living in the same building.” She throws her hands out to her side. “As if that’s reason enough not to spend time with him now.”

Ashlyn wraps her arms around her and pulls her in for a hug. “What do you wanna do, sweetie? Want us to all go down there and hang out in the bar?”

Becca shakes her head as she pulls away. “I wanna get drunk,” she says as a matter-of-fact.

Ashlyn looks up at me. “Show me what you have this place stocked with.”

I stand back and let Ashlyn do her thing. I’m not good with women who cry. Or women, in general. In the bedroom—I got that part covered. Any other aspect of a woman’s life—I got shit! It’s been almost two hours since Becca came back from finding Conner, and she has accomplished getting drunk. No, that’s an understatement; she’s shitfaced. And still no sign of Conner.

“I just don’t know what to do,” she cries as she sits at the bar in the kitchen. Big tears run down her cheeks, and I hate to see her like this. I feel so helpless. Ashlyn sits beside her. Jaycent and I stand on the other side of the bar in the kitchen as we take in the agony of my sister’s love life. Empty shot glasses litter the bar, and bottles of alcohol sit on the kitchen counter. An untouched grilled cheese sits on the silver tray from room service. Ashlyn had me order it, informing Becca needed to eat something, but she refused it once it arrived. My sister was on a mission, and it’s safe to say she accomplished it.

Ashlyn places her arm over her shoulders. “You do what is best for you,” she says softly.

“I thought he was best for me.” She sobs. “Now, I just don’t know. What if he leaves me?” She places her head in her hands as she continues to cry uncontrollably.

Ashlyn takes her hands away and makes her look at her. “It’s okay if he does,” she says softly. “I’m not saying it won’t hurt like a bitch, but I will be here for you no matter what.” She gives Becca a small smile. “Remember when Jake dumped me in a newsletter?” Becca nods, wiping the tears from her cheeks. “We spent that entire weekend drinking nothing but wine and only eating chocolate mint ice cream while watching every Nicholas Sparks movie ever made.” The tears continue to fall, and this time, Ashlyn wipes them away. “You ignored every phone call, text, and called in to work to be there for me. I would do nothing less for you, Becca. You are beautiful. Smart. Caring and loving. You deserve so much better than what he is giving you. You don’t need him.” She looks at her as if they’re the only two in the room. “Say it, Becca. You don’t need a man.”

She swallows as she tries to slow the tears. “I don’t need a man,” she says softly.

“Make me believe it.” Ashlyn urges.

“I don’t need a man,” my sister says with more conviction, and Ashlyn’s smiles.

“That’s better—”

Becca cuts her off, throwing her arms around Ashlyn’s neck. She gently rubs her back and then we hear the sobs again. Jaycent and I watch uncomfortably as Ashlyn holds her tightly. She whispers to her, but it’s too low for us to hear over my sister’s cries. Within a few minutes, they start to quiet. Becca finally pulls away from Ashlyn, and she lets out a yawn. “Well, boys, we’re gonna call it a night.” Ashlyn looks up at me. “Thanks—”

“No,” Becca interrupts her. “You stay and party with them.” Her dark green eyes are puffy and red, and it breaks my heart that she allows such a piece of shit to make her feel this low.

Ashlyn shakes her head. “I go where you go,” she says, and I smile to myself. This is exactly the Ashlyn that my sister has told me about. I don’t know much about her because I never asked about her best friend, but she would tell me about this woman who looked over her like I did when we were younger.

“I need to pee,” Becca, all of a sudden, blurts out, making us laugh.

“May I?” Ashlyn asks, looking at me and then nodding to my bedroom.

“Yes. Of course.”

Jaycent and I just stand there as we watch Ashlyn help her to my bedroom. “How many times?” Jaycent asks me once they are behind the closed door.

“What?” I look at him.

He tips his beer and then asks with an edge to his voice. “How many times do you think he’s made her feel like that?” he asks through clenched teeth.

“I don’t know, but I promise you it will be the last.”

When the door to my bedroom opens, I’m in the middle of pouring Jaycent and me a shot. “Where’s Becca?” he asks when we look up to see it’s just Ashlyn.

“She’s in your bed, Ryder,” She smiles softly. “I hope you don’t mind, but she just wanted to lay down for a second. She said the room was spinning and then she just passed out.”

I shake my head. “No problem.” I pat the bar top. “Come take a shot with us.” She has had just as many shots as Becca had, and although she may be tipsy, she is nowhere near drunk.

I set her shot down, and before we can even toast, she throws it back and places it back on the countertop. “That was nice of you.” She looks at me with her big blue eyes and a frown on her face. “What you said to her ...”

She shrugs it off. “I meant it. I love her like a sister and would do anything for her.”

I pour her another shot, and then I turn to Jaycent. “He needs to disappear,” I say.

He slams back his shot and gives me a cruel smile. “I’m already on it.” Then he takes off out of the suite.

“I didn’t mean this very second,” I say, trying to stop him, but it’s too late. When Jaycent makes up his mind about something, there’s no stopping him.

I frown when I see Ashlyn is no longer sitting at the bar, but her shot glass is, and it’s empty. I scan the kitchen and living room but don’t see her. Then I spot her. She’s outside, standing on the balcony in the rain. I place my full shot glass on the bar and make my way out there. She doesn’t turn around as I open and close the door.

The rain is still coming down, and it’s a tad chilly since the wind is blowing hard. She stands at the end of the patio, holding the black rail. Her white sweatpants cling to her thin legs, and her white jacket hangs from her narrow shoulders from the water soaking it and weighing it down.

I walk up next to her. I look at her as she squints while looking into … well, nothing. You can’t even see the ocean because the rain is coming down so hard.

“What are you doing out here? You’re getting soaked,” I say, looking her over.

She turns to face me. I expect her to say *no shit*. Or *can’t get nothing by you*. Instead, she smiles. A beautiful slow smile. “I love the rain.” She turns back to look off the balcony. “I’ve lived in Seattle all of my life.” She shrugs. “And I guess living there you get used to it, but it still amazes me every time I see it.” She turns to look over at me. “Does it often rain in New York?”

“Not nearly as much as it does in Seattle.” I place my forearms on the rail, and my body breaks out in goose bumps from the cold. It’s crazy how much the temperature has dropped since yesterday.

“Are you excited about moving to New York?” I ask her.

“Yeah. I’m ready for a new beginning.”

I frown. “You sound like you’re running from something in Seattle.”

She shakes her head. “No. I just …” She sighs. “I’m just ready to start my life.”

I understand what she means by that. “Well, there’s no better way than New York.” I smile.

She turns again to face me. Water soaks our feet, and my shirt and jeans cling to me, but I feel no rush to go and dry off. She chuckles. “To be honest, I would much rather be moving here.” She lifts her hands out to her side and tilts her head back. Fuck, she’s so beautiful and free. And a tad crazy. Like who just stands in the middle of the rain? “I love the ocean. And the beach,” she says, opening her eyes and lowering her hands to her side. “It’s so beautiful.”

“You’re beautiful,” I say without thought.

“Ryder.” A small smile spreads across her face as she steps up to me. “Are you trying to make me blush?”

I reach up and place my hand on her wet, cool cheek, and she leans into it. “No. Just stating a fact,” I say seriously.

She places her hands on my soaked chest and runs them up to my shoulders where she then links her arms around my neck. “Didn’t you have something to prove to me?” she asks with a twinkle in her blue eyes.

“I do,” I say smiling, remembering our conversation a little while ago in the kitchen when she told me I had disappointed her last night and she had faked it. Such bullshit.

I go to pull her toward the door, but after a few steps, I remember that my sister is passed out drunk on my bed. “Shit,” I hiss.

“What’s wrong?”

I turn to face her. “I forgot about Becca …”

She shakes her head, stopping me. “We don’t need to go inside, Ryder.”

My brows crease, and she pulls her hands away from mine. My eyes shoot to her chest as she reaches up and starts to unzip her jacket. It falls to the balcony, causing the water to splash up and hit my jeans. We’re no longer standing in the middle of the rain since we stepped away from the ledge, but it’s raining so hard and fast that it can’t run off the sides of the balcony fast enough.

She surprises me even more when she reaches down for the hem of her tank top and then pulls it up and over her head. “Have you ever had sex in

the rain, Ryder?" Her voice is soft, almost a whisper.

I shake my head slowly, still trying to wrap my head around what is about to happen. She bites her lower lip as she reaches up and slowly unzips her sports bra. "Neither have I."

Without thought, I reach up and cup her bare breasts. She hisses in a breath. "First time for everything," I say roughly. My cock is hard, and my mind is spinning. I quickly look around but only see rain. The balcony spans the length of the suite, and everywhere I look, all I see is the water running down the sides of the concrete awning. It's like a curtain that hides us from the world. My eyes go back to hers and get lost in the sight of the blue marbles. All I can see is her, but all I hear is the sound of the rain falling around us. She's like the calm in the middle of a hurricane. Or the entire sea when all you need is a single drop of water. I'm a drizzle, and she's a downpour. I've never experienced such a rare and beautiful thing in my life.

She steps up to me, and her bare chest presses into my soaked shirt. I'm breathing heavily, and my heart pounds in my chest. "Gonna just stand there and stare? Or are you gonna finish undressing me?" she asks with a naughty smile on her face.

A growl escapes my lips as I reach down to her sweatpants and untie them. They pool at her feet, and she steps out of them. I grab her arm and push her up against the wall right next to the door. That way, we're somewhat hidden. I'd hate Jaycent to be in the living room or kitchen and see us having sex up against the window.

"Ryder." She breathes as I press her into the wall. This position has us closer to the side rail of the balcony, so water lightly splashes on us as it comes in at an angle. Her nipples are hard, and her breathing ragged.

"Yes, baby?" I ask, leaning in and pressing my lips to her neck. I lick the rain off her as if I've been in the Sahara for weeks and am on the verge of dehydration. Her skin is cool to my lips, and her heart pounds against my chest. "Tell me, baby." I wanna hear her say it.

"Fuck me in the rain." Her voice is desperate, and her body is shaking with need. I spread her legs with mine, and a hand goes to her pussy. I bite

down on the soft flesh of her neck as I feel how wet she is for me. A soft cry rips from her throat. I unclamp my teeth from her skin and softly kiss it.

She rises to her tiptoes as I slide a finger into her tight pussy. Fuck, this woman is tight. I add another finger, and she clamps around me, reminding me just how good she felt wrapped around my cock. I grind my hips into hers.

She tilts her head back, lips open and panting as she moans. I've never seen anything more perfect! The rain falling on us. The sound of thunder in the distance. The way her body clings to mine.

I reach up with my free hand and grab her face. I pull it down and press my lips to hers. I crave her lips on mine. And she doesn't disappoint. She kisses me with desperation. Her hands go to my belt, and I allow her to unbuckle it followed by undoing my jeans. I moan into her mouth when she takes my hard cock into her cool hand. She starts to stroke it firmly but gently.

Her tongue dances with mine, and I tilt my head to the side to deepen the kiss. Her hand on my cock picks up speed, and I place both of my hands on the wall on either side of her head to help keep my balance. This woman is sucking me in like a tornado, and any minute, she's gonna tear me in two.

My jeans are still halfway on, but she lets go of my cock long enough to tear my t-shirt up and over my head. As soon as it's off, my lips are back on hers. This time, when she grabs my cock, she pulls on it, forcing me to step to her. She runs it along her pussy, and I inhale sharply.

Not able to wait any longer, I shove her hand out of the way and take over. I start to push it into her when I realize I don't have a fucking condom on me. I look down into her blue eyes. "Are you …?" I go to ask her if she is on birth control when she grabs the back of my neck and pulls my lips to hers.

"Yes," she breathes into my mouth. And that was all I needed. It's as if I'm drunk on her. All rational thought has left my mind. All I know is that I need to be inside her, and I would prefer nothing between us anyway. I push myself into her, and this time, she swallows my cry at how she wraps around me like a glove. Like she was meant to be mine.

I reach down, grab her ass and pull her off her feet. She wraps her legs around my waist as I work my way in and out of her as if I can't get enough of her pussy pulling me in. Gripping me tightly. She pulls her lips away from mine, and the sound of the rain coming down around us silences her gasp.

I hold her in my hands as I kiss her lips and neck. She whimpers, moans, and gasps for air as I fuck her with pure need. My thighs scream due to the fact I'm standing up. My arms tire from her weight, but I don't stop. She comes on my dick with my name on her lips, and the feel of her pulsing around me has me following her.

I stand on shaky legs, still holding her up against the wall, and just stare at her. A small smile on her face and a blush in her cheeks. We're still in a bubble of water invisible to the world around us. At this very moment, it's as if no one else exists.

"Well …" She takes a deep breath. "Guess you caught me," She takes another deep breath. "I was lying after all."

I let out a laugh as I try to catch my breath as well. "So I am a sex God?"

"Oh, shut it." She tries to push me away from her as she unwraps her legs from my waist, but my hands stop her. I'm not ready to let her go. And I can't help but think that in a week, this gorgeous, wild hurricane is going to live in the same building as I do.

Thunder booms behind us, and then lightning lights up the sky. It makes her blue eyes look almost see-through. My heart pounds in my chest, I'm covered in goose bumps, and my entire body shakes. I could blame it on the rain, the cold, but the truth is, she did it to me.

"Happy birthday, Ryder," she says softly. And I know for a fact that no birthday will ever be as good as this one.

I place my hand on her neck and lean in for one more taste because well, I just can't get enough of her.

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Two hours later, I'm walking out of Jaycent's room after using his shower. Looking out the living room windows, I see that it's still raining just as hard as it was earlier. I make my way into the kitchen, open the fridge, and grab a beer. As I sit down on the couch, I see the door to my bedroom open, and Ashlyn walks out. My hand freezes as the tip of the bottle touches my lips while my cock starts to harden. She's dressed in a pair of my gray sweatpants; they hang really low on her narrow hips and are so long they cover up her feet. She wears a white t-shirt of mine that hangs off one shoulder, letting me know that she doesn't have a bra on. My first thought is to take her back out on the balcony and let the water soak the shirt, but then we'd both need another shower. Her hair is wet but up in a bun, showing off her neck, and my lips crave to kiss the soft skin.

She spots me and gives me a big smile as she plops down on the chair opposite the couch. I hate the distance between us. "Hope you don't mind," she says, gesturing to my clothes that cover her body.

"Not at all," I say, clearing my throat and taking the sip of my beer I had intended to do before she walked out.

"I didn't go through your stuff, I promise. These were on the end of your bed," she explains. "And well, my clothes are still very wet." She laughs.

I nod as I get off the couch. "Would you like a beer?" I need to walk it off. The thought of us outside is consuming me.

She lays her head back and looks up at the ceiling. "Yeah, I'll take one more. Please."

I walk over to her from the fridge. She remains looking up at the ceiling, eyes closed and lips parted while her chest rises and falls as she breathes deeply. I need a distraction. "So what did you major in?" I ask as I hand her a beer.

"Thank you." She takes a sip as I go back over to the couch. "Art History," she says, eyeing me. Seconds later, she laughs. "I know that look."

"What look?" I ask, watching the way her eyes shine when she laughs. The lightning that lights up the room has them glowing.

She smiles at me warmly. “The one that says what are you gonna do with *that* degree?”

“No, I wasn’t—”

She waves me off. “I’ve heard it all my life,” she says, and I frown. “I have always had a thing for art. Ever since I can remember,” she explains. “Other kids begged their parents to take them to the park or the zoo. I always begged my mom to take me to the art museum or gallery.” She pauses and takes a sip of her beer. “I am fascinated at how you can take one piece of art and everyone who looks at it will interpret it differently. Have you ever been to an art gallery?”

I shake my head. “I don’t get out much. Work takes up all of my time. If I’m not working in New York, I’m flying across the world for work.”

She frowns. “That must get old.”

“Not really. I love my job.”

“I guess getting to see the world would be a plus.”

“Well, if you consider looking at it through hotel room windows and airplanes, then yeah, it’s a plus.”

She smiles softly. “Sounds like you needed this vacation.”

I nod. “The last real vacation I took was years ago.” She looks down at her beer bottle and starts to pick at the label. “What are your plans once you’re in New York?”

She lifts her bottle and takes another sip. “I have an interview with Talia’s Gallery the day after we get there.”

“Wow,” I say slowly. “Talia’s …”

“Yeah.” She laughs softly. “I was shocked too when they called me for an interview. I had a professor whose family lives in New York. She informed me that they were looking for a gallery associate for marketing and sales.”

“That”—I pause to think of the right words—“would be amazing.”

“It would be, but they want someone who has at least two years of experience. It’s a long shot, but I’m confident that I can change their mind,” she says with a smile.

“I have no doubt,” I say, looking her up and down again, ready to change the subject. She has her legs crossed and the way she is sitting in the chair

has her shirt falling more off her shoulder. I lick my lips.

"Stop it."

My eyes shoot back on hers. "Stop what?" I ask innocently.

"Looking at me like that," she says as a matter-of-fact.

"How am I looking at you?" I lift the beer to my lips to hide my smile.

She shakes her head, as she smiles "It's not happening again."

You're just lying to yourself. "Ever?"

She goes to answer, but the door to the hotel swings open. Jaycent walks in with narrowed eyes and a tight jaw. "What happened?" I ask, standing. He just shakes his head as he continues through the hotel room. I watch him fist his hands down by his side and I catch a little speck of blood on them. He goes into his room and slams the door shut.

"What was that about?" she asks looking back and forth from the door to me.

"He went after Conner," I inform her.

She smiles. "I hope he beat his ass."

I chuckle. "I have no doubt about that."

ASHLYN

"I've never liked him," I say, shifting in my seat to sit on my right foot. "I met Becca the first day of class freshman year. I met Conner right after our class," I scowl. "Right off the bat, I knew he was gonna be a pain in the ass."

"Yeah, Becca and I always got along really well. Until he came along," he growls.

"Why is that?"

"Because she didn't like what I had to say about him." He sighs. "She was a freshman in high school when they met at a party. I was away at Brown University and was on the phone with my mother when she started talking about this guy named Conner. I asked who he was, and I admit that I already didn't like him. I tried to tell Mom that, from my standpoint, she was too young to date. He is two years older than she is, after all. Well, my

father was too busy with work to even notice they were together, and my mother was too wrapped up in her life that no one knew how serious it got so fast." The muscles in his neck tighten as he talks about his mother. "Becca fell hard. I came home that Christmas, and my father had actually taken off work to go away for a weekend. It was our first and last family vacation. We had plans to go skiing. I was outside helping pack the limo. Conner walked out and just threw his bag on the ground. Too fucking lazy to place it in the limo. So before he could go back into the house, I jumped in the driver seat and put it in reverse …"

"You did not!" I gasp.

He nods. "I did." I start to laugh. "It wasn't like I ran his ass over. He cried and said I broke his hip." He rolls his eyes. "I did knock him off his feet."

"God, I wish I could have seen that," I say with laughter.

"My mother was mad at me. Becca didn't talk to me the entire trip. The only person who was on my side was my father. By that time, my father couldn't stand him either." He takes a drink of his beer.

"I once made him think he had herpes," I say proudly.

He spits his beer out and places his hand over his mouth to catch what ran down his chin. "How did you manage to pull that off?" he asks wide-eyed.

I smile. "One night, while he and Becca were in bed, I snuck into their room and took two pairs of his boxers." His brows lift to his hairline. "The following day, I went to my parents'. They live outside Seattle on twenty acres. Anyway, I found some poison ivy and rubbed his underwear in it." He burst out laughing. "I put them back and he wore them." I shrug. "He went to the doctor; he was so afraid to tell Becca 'cause he thought he had caught something. I heard him telling a friend on the phone that if he told her, then she would know he fucked around on her. Come to find out, it was just poison ivy. He finally told her and they tried for weeks to figure out where he could have gotten it. They never figured it out and I never told her what I did."

“That is genius.” He lifts the drink to his lips but lowers it as he looks at me. “I’m gonna have to keep an eye on you.”

I smile and give him a wink. “Yes, you will,” I agree.

***

For the second day in a row, I wake up in Ryder O’Kane’s hotel bed, tired, and sore.

I open my eyes and look out the bedroom window to see dark gray clouds lingering in the sky. The windows have water spots on them, but I don’t see that it is raining at this very moment.

I yawn, stretching my arms and legs out once again because I’m sore all over from what we did last night on the balcony. But this time when I roll over, I don’t see a naked man with short dark hair. I see a pretty woman with long dark hair, still dressed in her clothes from the night before. Becca must feel my eyes on hers because they flutter open. She groans, running her hand over her face.

“Good morning, princess,” I say with a smile.

“Morning,” she mumbles before pulling the fluffy white comforter up and over her head.

“You need to take some more Advil,” I inform her.

“More?” She pulls the covers from her face and looks at me with her puffy eyes. She blinks a few times as if to bring me into focus.

I get out of the bed and make my way to the bathroom. “Yes. I gave you some last night before you passed out. Now, you need to take some more.” I grab some off Ryder’s counter and then grab the glass sitting in the corner and fill it with some water.

“Then why do I still feel like a Mack truck ran me over?” she asks, sitting up as I reenter the bedroom.

“Because you drank like three times your weight,” I say with a soft smile.

She gladly takes the Advil and water from me. After she swallows them, she pauses to look around the room. “Where are we?”

“We’re in Ryder’s hotel bedroom.”

“What? Why?” She looks up at me, green eyes wide.

“I brought you in here last night to go to the bathroom. On our way out, you said everything was spinning, and you just wanted to lay down for a second. You were out the moment your head hit the pillow.”

She drops her head in her hands. I place the water on the nightstand, and she starts to cry. “Hey,” I say as I sit down beside her. She sobs as she turns to face me and places her head on my chest

“I’m so sorry,” she cries.

“Why?” I ask, running my hand down the back of her shirt. “You did nothing wrong,” I tell her.

She nods against my chest. “I have ruined our vacation.”

I push her away from my chest so I can look her in the eyes. “Becca,” I say gently. “You haven’t ruined our vacation. What would make you think that?”

She wipes the tears from her face. “Our first night here, I left you at a bar by yourself.” I go to speak, but she stops me. “Then last night, I left you again to chase Conner down. Then all I did was come back and cry over a stupid boyfriend. I drank so much I passed out. This time was supposed to be just you and me, and I just keep dumping you by yourself.” Now, she’s back to sobbing.

I rub her shoulder and give her a soft smile. “You haven’t ruined anything, Becca. I assure you.”

“Conner dumped me last night,” she whispers with shame.

I grind my teeth at the sorry little bastard for breaking her heart once again. “Maybe things have settled down,” I offer. “Once we get down to our room and you guys talk, he’ll apologize.” I almost laugh at my words. Conner apologize? That won’t happen.

She shakes her head. “Last night when I told you that I had found him in the bar, well, we ended up going back to our room. He packed all of his stuff and left.”

“What?” I demand. “Where the hell did he go?” We’re in Florida, for God’s sake. “Did he get his own room?”

She shakes her head. “He had been on the phone with his dad when he left Ryder’s hotel last night, and he asked his dad to get him an early flight back. He packed his stuff and left.”

I don’t know what to say, so I just pull her into my arms. I slowly rock us back and forth as I hold her to me while whispering, “I’m sorry.” What else is there for me to do? I can’t put her broken heart back together. And I sure as hell can’t make Conner come back to her.

I also feel like our trip is over. That maybe we should just go back to Seattle. I’ve never had my heart broken per se, but I know what it feels like to no longer be wanted. And the only place you want to be in is your bed with the people who love you. There’s no reason to stay here in Florida when she’s not going to even want to leave the room.

“Why don’t you go and take a hot bath,” I say, “And I’ll order us some breakfast from room service. Does that sound like a good plan?”

She pulls away, nodding. She very slowly makes her way over to the bathroom and shuts the door. I get up to open the bedroom door quietly so as not to wake Ryder, who I know slept on one of the couches last night.

“Morning.”

My head snaps up when I hear Ryder’s deep voice. I look in the living room, but he’s not there. I scan the room as I walk and find him in the kitchen. He’s wearing the same black basketball shorts he was wearing last night minus the t-shirt. The shorts lay low on his hips showcasing his defined V and sculpted abs. His smooth chest and broad shoulders have my mouth watering. “Good morning,” I say, quickly looking away. Now is not the time to stare at my best friend’s brother when she is hurting.

I look out the sliding glass door to the clouds and sigh as I remember what we did out there last night. Without thought, my eyes go back to him. His brows crease, and he frowns. “What’s wrong?”

I run a hand through my hair. “I’m gonna call and change our flights.” I keep my eyes trained on his, avoiding his bare chest. “We’re gonna head on back to Seattle today.”

His frown deepens. “Becca wants to go home early?”

I sit down at the bar. “No. She told me everything that happened between her and Conner last night, and well, let’s just say that he’s history. And I know she would much rather be in her own home than here.”

“Fucking bastard,” he hisses under his breath. Then he tilts his head to the side as if in thought. “Why don’t you guys come to New York?”

I just stare at him blankly. “You’re joking.”

He shakes his head, causing his long dark hair to cover his eyes. The long layers aren’t spiked as they lay down. He runs his hands through it to push them out of his face, and it takes everything in me to not lean over this bar and place my hands in it while I kiss his delicious lips. “I’m dead serious. You have another three days of vacation. Why don’t you just fly back to New York with us today and spend them there? You guys can stay with me.” He smiles sheepishly. “If not, I’m sure my mother has your apartment ready by now. But if not, I’ll be at work during the day, so you’ll have my place to yourself. But you ladies are more than welcome to.”

That’s a horrible idea. I’ve already broken my first rule I made with him. “Thanks. But I know what the next three days will consist of, and I don’t think she’s gonna wanna cry her eyes out in your spare bedroom while you and I are in yours,” I say as a matter-of-fact.

His smile widens as he places his forearms on the bar, bending over to place his face level with mine. Those beautiful green eyes sparkle as his muscles strain from leaning over, and my eyes linger on them longer than they should. “That’s a little presumptuous of you.” His eyes travel down my neck and to my chest. They linger on my breasts, and his tongue slowly runs over his lip.

I laugh. “So you weren’t just looking me up and down while you offer up your place?”

His eyes darken as they move back to meet mine. “That shirt has never looked so good,” he whispers seductively.

It smells just like you; clean and spicy like your cologne. “Focus,” I say more to myself than to him.

He sighs as he stands upright. “Okay, so maybe my mind was imagining what your sexy body would look like lying on my bed.” His voice lowers to

a growl. “Up against my door in the shower. Bent over my kitchen table …”

My body heats up, and I shift in my chair as I clear my throat. “Be that as it may, we need to stick to the topic.” I clear my throat.

“Right.” He shakes his head to clear it. Then he gets serious. “He’s gone, isn’t he?”

I nod. “I’m not sure if he went back to Seattle or straight to New York, but he seems to be gone for good this time.”

“I’m glad that he’s gone, but I hate that it’s hurting her.”

“She’ll recover,” I say, getting up from the bar. “One day, she’ll wake up and realize this was a blessing, not a curse.” I start to walk toward the door.

“You sound like you know this from experience. Someone broke your heart?” he asks softly.

I snort. “You can’t break what isn’t willingly given to you,” I say as a matter-of-fact, and he tilts his head to the side as if considering my words. He opens his mouth to speak, but I give him my back as I start to walk to the front door of his hotel room.

“Where are you going?” he asks in a rush.

I turn to face him as I continue to walk backwards. “I’m going down to our hotel room to get her some clothes, and then when I get back, I’m gonna order some breakfast.”

He picks up his room key that sits on the counter beside him and tosses it to me. “That way you can get back in.”

“Thanks,” I say as I catch it.

“And no need for room service; we can go downstairs and eat.”

I shake my head at him. “Men. They have no clue how a breakup works.” He frowns at my words, and I give him a soft smile. It’s not their fault that they are clueless. “She’s not gonna wanna go out in public whatsoever. I’ll be surprised if she even comes out of your room.”

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CHAPTER EIGHT

RYDER

Ashlyn was right, but I would never tell her that. It's a little past noon, and my sister is still in my bedroom. She had brought her clothes back and then ordered food. Ashlyn even ate hers in there with her. And she informed me that she changed their flights, but it's not until tomorrow morning. I wish we could stay another day with them, but our plane leaves at five tonight for New York.

Jaycent and I are sitting on the couch. He's flipping through the channels, looking for something halfway good to watch, when my bedroom door opens. We both turn to look over our shoulders and see Ashlyn walk out. And to my surprise, my sister walks out after her.

"Hey, sis," I say, standing up. I feel like I should hug her. Possibly hold her? I don't know what to do for a woman who has a broken heart. Growing up, I always fixed her boo-boos or made her laugh when she cried, but now, I'm at a loss.

"Hey," she replies softly. She looks better than she did last night when she was crying her eyes out at the kitchen counter. Her green eyes are still red and puffy, but that could be from the alcohol she consumed last night.

"How do you feel?" I walk up to her and give her the one-arm hug, just feeling out the situation. She wraps both of her arms around me and hugs me tightly, so I hug her back.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"For what?"

She pulls away and continues to the couch. "I ruined your vacation too. You came here to see me, and I haven't spent any time with you." She takes a deep breath. "And I ruined your birthday," she adds with a sniff.

“No, you didn’t,” I argue. I’ve never been one for birthdays anyhow. But in no way did she ruin it for me. Just getting to be here with her made it amazing.

“I’ve ruined everything. I should have never let Conner come with us.” She drops her head and lets out a little sob.

I walk over to her and kneel down in front of her. “Becca, look at me.” She slowly lifts her head. “You didn’t ruin anything. I promise.”

“I just miss you so much.”

I give her a big smile. “I miss you too. And just think, after next week, we will see each other every single day.” That gets a smile out of her.

The next few hours went by quickly, but with every minute that passed, I could see the smile return to her face. Ashlyn even got her to laugh a few times.

“You’ll keep me updated on how she’s doing?” I ask Ashlyn as we stand at the hotel’s entrance. Our car is outside, waiting to take us to the airport.

She chuckles but nods. “Every hour on the hour,” she jokes.

“I just worry about her.” Seattle is so far away.

Her face softens. “I know. But I’ve been watching over her for four years; that’s not about to change.”

I wrap my arm around her thin waist and pull her towards me. Her blue eyes widen in surprise, and she sucks in a deep breath. “I know.” I lower my lips to hers. “And thank you for that.” I press my lips to hers and give her a soft kiss. When I pull away, I stare into those gorgeous blue eyes that will forever remind me of the ocean. I search them as she stares up at me in surprise. I lift my hands and cup her face. She parts her lips and sucks in a ragged breath before licking her lips. I don’t know why, but I don’t wanna leave her. I just met this woman and already the thought of going a week without her makes my chest tight.

“Ryder—”

Before she can finish that sentence, I press my lips to hers again. Just a soft kiss on her lips, but I linger longer than I should when she doesn’t push me away. When I finally do pull away, I kiss her forehead. “See you soon,” I say roughly then spin around and walk out the front door.

“Ready?” Jaycent asks me as he shuts the trunk, securing our bags.

“Yeah.” I get into the back of the cab, and I look out my window to the front door of the hotel and see my sister standing next to Ashlyn, her arm over her shoulders as they both wave.

The cab pulls off before I can even lift my hand to wave back. “She’ll be okay,” Jaycent says. I turn to look at him sitting beside me. “Ashlyn seems to have things under control.”

I nod my head in agreement, but that doesn’t mean I like it. “And what about Conner?”

“He won’t be coming back,” is all he says, and I grunt.

“Hopefully, you didn’t do anything that will put your ass in jail.” I can’t help but laugh as I say it.

He snorts. “He might be a whiny little bitch, but he’s not stupid enough to tell on me.”

I leave it at that. The less I know, the better.

ASHLYN

It isn’t until minutes later that I realize I’m still waving at a car that no longer sits by the curb. I clear my throat and shake my head as I try to clear it from that kiss Ryder just gave me. I drop my hand and let out a long breath. I bring myself back to reality and look over to find Becca checking her phone for the fiftieth time in the last ten minutes. Expecting a call or text from Conner, I suppose.

“We’re heading home, too,” I tell her. No better time than the present.

Her head snaps up and she looks at me. “What? We have three more days here.”

“I called this morning and got us an early flight home.”

Her eyes instantly start to water, and she sniffs. “I’m sorry I ruined our vacation.” She starts to cry.

I pull her in for a hug. “You didn’t ruin anything.” Then pulling away, I drape an arm over her shoulder again. “Come on. Let’s go up to our room and order some room service for dinner and drinks.”

***

The following morning, our plane left Florida before the sun even came up. We looked like two girls who partied our asses off. Big black sunglasses covered our eyes. I chose to wear Ryder's oversized t-shirt with yoga pants. Becca wore a hat that I was surprised even fit, considering how big her glasses were. She also wore a big t-shirt and a pair of cotton shorts. We had no makeup on and looked like we hadn't showered in days. In reality, I was still in a trance from Ryder's goodbye kiss, and she was trying to recover from a breakup that she never saw coming.

I was the nice and responsible friend who didn't drink a lick of alcohol on the plane although I'm sure Becca drank more mimosas than she could handle. By the time we got back to our apartment in Seattle, she was drunk, but at least she was laughing. Her hat hung off her head, and somewhere between the airport and our apartment, she had lost her sunglasses, so I gave her mine.

I open the door to our apartment and drop my suitcase at the front door. "Home." I sigh. There really is no place like it.

Becca stumbles past me and into her bedroom. I fall down onto the floor in the living room where the couch used to be. We sold it a week ago. Harry jumps into my lap and starts to meow. "I missed you too big boy." I pet the soft skin on his back as he purrs loudly.

He meows again. He's such a vocal kitty. That was one of the reasons I picked him. I wanted someone who would talk to me when I was alone. I hear Becca let out a scream of frustration, and Harry takes off with a hiss.

"Everything okay?" I ask, looking over my shoulder and down the hall.

She doesn't respond. Instead, she comes storming down the hallway and into the kitchen. I watch her yank a trash bag out of the box underneath the kitchen sink and then slam the cabinet shut before storming back to her room.

"Becca?" I call out. "Need help with something?" I ask, already getting up off the floor.

As I make my way down the hallway, I can hear her cussing up a storm, which is not what she does. I pass my bedroom door and then make it to hers. I stand in the doorway as she sits on her bedroom floor. She starts throwing stuff into the white trash bag. “What are you doing?”

She responds without looking up to me. “I’m throwing anything and everything away that that piece of shit ever gave me,” she growls.

I look around and see that her closet door is open. I can see the side that Conner occupied, and it’s empty. What hangers aren’t thrown on the floor are hanging on the rod with nothing on them. “He was here?” I ask.

She nods her head quickly. “He got all his shit and left.” She angrily wipes her nose with the back of her hand. “I hope that son of a bitch is already back in New York.”

I walk over to her and sit down. “I’m sorry,” I say softly.

When she looks up at me, I’m surprised to see her eyes clear of tears, but they are bloodshot from lack of sleep and drinking. “Don’t be sorry.” She throws a picture with her and him that I took one night while we were out at the Space Needle and the glass shatters into a million pieces when it hits the floor.

“Are you sure you wanna do this?” I ask. She’s mad now, but will she still feel this strongly about him being gone once the alcohol wears off?

She pauses to look up at me once more. “I’ve never been more sure in my life.” Her voice is steady and I smile. Finally, she is going to move on. She has spent the last two days crying, but now, she’s in the next stage. Anger.

Bye, bye Conner. I can honestly say I will not miss you!

The following morning, I’m lying in bed. It’s easily after ten in the morning, but I’m still on vacation, so my ass isn’t getting out of bed until after noon. Not like I have much to do anyway.

I curl up on my pillow and let out a long sigh when my phone dings, letting me know I just got a message. I open it up when I see Ryder’s name. We had exchanged numbers after we finished having sex out on his balcony. Not sure why I gave him mine when he asked for it, but I figured it

was best, considering the condition his sister was in at the time. This is the first time I've heard from him.

Ryder: *Do you think she really is all right?*

I smile at how worried he is about Becca.

Me: *She seems fine. What did she tell you?*

I'm not sure she has told him about the scene we came home to yesterday or not.

Ryder: *I messaged her last night just to check on her, and she said that he was history and assured me that she was over him. I just tried to call her, and she didn't answer.*

Me: *She was still upset yesterday and ended up getting drunk on the plane coming home. But once we got here and she realized he was really gone, it was like a light switch. I believe her when she says she's okay. And she hasn't answered because she's probably still asleep.*

Ryder: *Probably? Are you not home?*

Me: *I am. But I'm still in bed, and the apartment is dead quiet. So she must be too.*

Ryder: *Hmm…. You're in bed, huh?*

Me: *Yes.* I smile.

Ryder: *What do you wear to bed?*

Me: *Does it matter?*

Ryder: *Humor me.*

What's it gonna hurt? Not like I haven't already slept with the guy.

Me: *I prefer to sleep naked.*

There's a long pause before he responds.

Ryder: *Prove it.*

Like those other women you see on the internet, I spend the next five minutes taking more photos than I should have to make sure I get a good one. Not quite sure why I care if it looked decent, but for some reason, it mattered. I end up sending him two. One is of my face as I gave him my best attempt at a flirty smile. The second is of my chest; I have one hand on my boob while the other is holding the camera. I really didn't care that I sent one without makeup on, considering the two days he knew me, I didn't have much on anyway.

"Hello, Harry."

I shoot up to a sitting position when I hear a male's voice in our apartment. "Bradley? Is that you?" I call out, remembering that I hadn't told him I was back in town and he didn't need to come by and take care of my cat.

My bedroom door opens and he walks in with a frown on his face dressed in a black t-shirt and worn-out jeans. Those dang black boots on his feet. "What are you doing home?"

I pull the comforter up and over my chest as I pat the spot beside me. He sits and I fill him in about our vacation, and how Conner managed to break Becca's heart once again, but I am interrupted when my phone dings.

I pick up my phone to see it's Ryder.

Ryder: *Fuck! Have I told you that you have the hottest fuckin' tits I've ever seen?* I roll my eyes but smile at his attempt to flatter me. *And you still look as gorgeous as I remember.*

I laugh at that one. *He's such a player.*

"Who are you talking to?" Bradley asks as he still sits on my bed.

I place my phone face down on the bed. "No one." I wave it off. For some reason, I don't want to tell him that I slept with Ryder. Although I'm sure Bradley slept with someone else while I was gone. He has them lined up. He's good looking, funny, and has his shit together. Who wouldn't want that? We don't judge one another, but I still feel like keeping what Ryder and I did between us. He'll just give me shit for it, and I'm too tired for that at the moment.

"Well, I gotta go," he says, leaning over to kiss me on the cheek. "I gotta be at work in twenty. I have a date tonight, so I wanted to run by and feed Harry this morning instead of this evening."

See what I mean. "A date, huh?" I ask, smiling.

"Yep. Met her Friday night out at the bar."

"So is this your first date?" I ask, already knowing that it's not. When Bradley wants something, he goes for it.

He shakes his head. "Third."

"Wow! You know what that means?" This girl probably has a three-date rule.

He wiggles his eyebrows, and then he's out the door. I lay back down and grab my phone, picking up where we left off.

Me: *You're making my teeth hurt with your sweetness.*

Ryder: *You're making my dick hard.*

I laugh.

Me: *Better find someone there to take care of it for you. Maybe have your secretary hide under your desk while she sucks you off.*

Ryder: *Keep talking like that and I'll be flying to Seattle and bring you back to New York.*

Me: *I have always wanted to join the mile-high club.* I joke.

Ryder: *Seriously so fucking hard right now!*

Me: *I bet you wish I were there, huh?*

Ryder: *Are you kidding? If you had come back to New York as I asked you to, I would have called in sick today and would be balls deep in your tight little pussy right now.*

I moan. Shit, my pussy throbs, wishing I had gone to New York. He sends me another message.

Ryder: *I'm walking into a meeting. Message you later.*

I throw my phone beside me as I dig into my nightstand. Gonna have to take matters into my own hands with him on my mind.

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CHAPTER NINE

RYDER

I place my phone down and open up an email. I have ten minutes before this meeting, and I have spent too much time talking to Ashlyn, so I'm not going to be prepared. I had just pulled up the emails when my door opens. My father walks in and sighs. "I just got off the phone with your mother," he states.

"And?" I ask, sitting back in my seat. Guess the emails will wait.

"Are you ignoring her?" She only calls him to rant about me or Becca.

"I was on the phone." She had called a few times while I was texting Ashlyn, and I sent her to voicemail each time. "I'm surprised you answered," I add.

"She called Jessica," he growls.

Oh, so the bitch got smart and called his assistant. I can't help but laugh. Kelly knows when my mother calls the office that I'm either in a meeting or out of the office.

He pinches the bridge of his nose as he closes his eyes. My mother rarely calls him, and when she does, she goes on and on about whatever rant she is on for the day. "She informed me that you have not RSVP'd to your cousin's wedding."

That's what was so important? "Right! I will do that today," I say with a nod.

"Your mother wants you to bring a date," he states. "She had mentioned Vicki."

I shake my head quickly. "I have a date already," I lie.

"You do?" he asks skeptically.

I nod. "Yes." I start to say her name but stop myself. He doesn't need to know who I am bringing at the moment. And I'm not even sure that Ashlyn

would want to go with me. But I'd be willing to beg her to keep me from going with Vicki.

He shuts the door and turns to face me and lets out a heavy sigh. I lean back in my chair, and he begins his speech. "Son, you know I don't judge others by how they live their life." I frown at his words. "Or make their living. But if you bring a hooker to the wedding, your mother will have a cow. Just like she did when you brought one to your Uncle Ben's birthday party."

"I was doing him a favor," I say, trying not to smile. "His wife had just left him, took his three kids and the dog. He wasn't gonna get that hot of an ass without paying for it." It was the best birthday gift he could have gotten. He told me that like ten times.

"Be that as it may, you could have warned me because your mother didn't see it that way," he states.

"Uncle Ben couldn't thank me enough. And look, now they're married," I say with a smile.

"They're getting a divorce," he corrects me, and I frown.

"Oh," I say simply.

"You know I couldn't care less how you choose to blow your money. I'm just saying your mother does, and I'm the one who has to live with her."

I laugh, like that really matters. He dodges her phone calls just as much as I do. And they live in a mansion. I'm pretty sure they don't even sleep in the same bedroom. "I promise. She is not a hooker," I repeat.

"So you say, but I'm going to ask you again. Does she require some kind of currency?"

I lean forward and cock an eyebrow. "Well, you of all people should know, Dad, nothing comes for free."

He clears his throat and nods his head all of a sudden uneasy with this conversation. "Will you be riding with me, your mother, and sister?"

I shake my head. "We'll be taking our own transportation."

He turns and opens the door. "Lord help me," he mumbles and then walks out as I laugh.

ASHLYN

Before we knew it, our vacation was over. And during the following week, we finished packing what we needed and sold what we didn't plan to take with us to New York. The apartment that Becca's parents bought her is fully furnished. Therefore, the only thing we are taking with us is our clothes. Our furniture wasn't anything special anyway, and to move what we did have cross-country would cost me a large fortune that I don't have at the moment, so I've sold everything that I didn't need.

We were down to our last night in Seattle, and we decided to spend the night at my parents' house. I didn't know when I might see them again, and the apartment was now empty.

My mom, Becca, and I sit on their couch while my father sits in his old brown leather recliner. My mother has been trying to throw it away for years, but he won't part with it. "Dinner was great. Thanks, Mom," I say, rubbing my belly. She made my favorite. Homemade lasagna.

"Yes. Thanks, Margaret," Becca says.

She sniffs. "Who am I gonna cook for after you girls leave?" she wonders aloud.

"I'm not going anywhere," my father says as if she hurt his feelings.

She rolls her eyes. "I know that. But your idea of dinner is KFC or a taco truck."

She stretches her arms out wide, draping them over mine and Becca's shoulders since she sits between us and pulls us in for a group hug. "I can't believe you are leaving tomorrow. This place won't be the same without you."

"You sure you don't wanna take my car?" my father asks.

I laugh. "How would I get it there?" Becca and I are flying.

"Your father and I can drive it to you," my mother says excitedly.

"I was joking, Mom." My father had helped me sell my car that they got me for my high school graduation on Craigslist. It stung a little to get rid of it. I loved that car. It was a BMW X5. They had bought it for me brand new four years ago as my present to go off to college. I got around twenty-five

thousand for it. I tried to give them some of it, but they wouldn't take it. Said that was my money.

I didn't think I would need a car in New York. Becca tells me that our apartment, which I haven't even seen, is in the middle of Manhattan and most people walk or take cabs anyway. "That's very nice, Dad, but I don't need your car."

He looks reluctant to take my no for an answer, but there's nothing to argue about. After a few long seconds of silence, he stands. "I'm gonna head to bed." He comes over to us and kisses me on the forehead. "Night, sugar." Then he walks over to the other side of the couch and does the same to Becca. "Coming to bed, Momma?" he asks my mom.

"Later," she tells him, and he nods. "I'm gonna spend some time with the girls."

Two hours later and starting our second Nicholas Sparks movie, me, my mother, and Becca are laughing and talking about the last four years of our lives.

"I'm surprised Becca liked me enough to be my best friend," I say with a smile.

"What? How can you say that?" she asks before taking a sip of her third glass of red wine. "I knew the moment you sat down next to me in class that we would be best friends."

I walk into my first class of my first year of college and blow a few loose strands of blond hair out of my face. I'm tired and hungover from a party I had gone to last night. I literally went home long enough to change clothes and here I am.

I scan the room, looking for an available seat. I find two in the very back, and I continue my search. I may not look reasonable, but I'm here and ready to learn. I finally spot an open seat on the first row. Smiling, I go to sit down in it when a man beats me to it. He plops down and leans over to speak to the brunette who sits next to him. She has an enormous bag of gummy bears on her desk. I can't hear what he is saying to her over all the chatter, but she seems to be ignoring him.

He reaches over taking the bag off her desk and proceeds to stick his hands inside to grab some. "Hey," she says, giving him the evil eye. "Get your dirty hands out of my gummy bears," she orders.

He just smirks at her. I walk over to them and come to a stop in front of their seats. He's too busy to notice me as he stuffs his face with the colorful little bears. I yank the bag out of his hands.

"Aren't those the ones that give you the shits?" I ask.

He looks up at me, half of a red gummy bear hanging out of his mouth. "Huh?" he mumbles.

"I've read the reviews on Amazon, and they are giving people the shits."

He opens his mouth and starts spitting them out onto the desk. He stands quickly, spins around, and runs up the stairs to exit out the back.

I sit down to pick up the bag and look at the pretty brunette beside me. "May I?" I ask.

She nods with a smile. "Of course."

I pop a few in my mouth and say, "Thank you."

She leans in and whispers, "Do they really give you the shits?"

I shrug. "Guess we'll find out."

My mom laughs as Becca tells her the story of how we met for the hundredth time since she's known her.

"We've been inseparable ever since," I add, taking a sip of my wine. Harry meows as he jumps on the couch and runs his hairless side against my hand, letting me know he wants me to pet him. I'm about to say something when I hear Becca's phone ring. She looks down, starring at it for a second and then presses something that silences the call.

"Who was that?" I ask, taking another sip. She just shakes her head as she stares at the TV, watching the movie silently and her smile gone. "Becca?"

She looks over at me and I see the tears start to well up in her eyes. "It was Conner," she whispers.

I sigh. "I thought he hadn't contacted you since Florida."

“He called me last night and I answered. Now, he won’t stop,” she admits softly.

“Becca, you can’t …”

“I hung up on him and haven’t answered any more calls or responded to his texts. But he’s making it hard. He knows tomorrow I’m moving back to New York and wants to try again.”

I grind my teeth in frustration. “What?” my mother asks surprised “You guys broke up?” She nods. “What happened?”

Her eyes land on mine for a brief second and then she lets out a deep breath. She still hasn’t told me what happened in Panama City, and I haven’t wanted to bring it up since I thought she was doing better, but it looks like she’s about to tell us. She plays with a ring on her right hand as she speaks softly. “While in Panama City. Our first night there, we went to a club for a foam party. We were dancing, having fun, and he said he was going to get us another round of drinks. I swear it was like twenty minutes later; I was heading to the restroom and saw him coming out. He was adjusting his pants, and I didn’t think anything of it until the woman walked out right behind him.” She takes a deep breath. “She was wiping her lips with the back of her hand.”

“Well …” my mother says trying to think of what to say. “Did you question him about it?”

She nods. “He blew up. Said I was overreacting. That I’m a crazy, jealous bitch, and he can’t do anything without me questioning him.”

“I’m not siding with him but could you have misread it?” she asks gently.

“They both came out of the men’s bathroom,” she says, shaking her head with disappointment.

I should have never stayed at the bar. “That fucking piece of—”

“Ashlyn,” my mother interrupts me.

“What?” I look at her. “He is. He treated her like shit,” I all but shout.

My mother sighs and then looks over at Becca. “Ashlyn may have her opinion, and I don’t condone what he did in any way, but you do deserve better. You deserve someone who will treat you how you deserve to be treated, and that is with respect.”

Her phone starts to ring again, and I reach out snatching it from her hands. I ignore his call and then hold down the button until it shuts it off. “Well, I’m telling you right now, Becca. I have stood by and let him treat you like crap because you loved him. But that made me a bad friend. Now, I’m going to be the best friend that I can be and make sure he doesn’t suck you back in.”

I expect her to be mad. To tell me it’s her life and she can love who she wants. Instead, she smiles. “Thank you.”

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CHAPTER TEN

RYDER

“Have you spoken to Ashlyn?” Jaycent asks as he sits in my office.

“No,” I say as I look over the papers scattered on my desk. My assistant, Kelly, needed the day off and days like today remind me just how invaluable she is.

“Why is that?” he asks curiously. I place my elbows on my desk as I look over the paperwork that has my head hurting. It’s all I’ve worked on for the last week. *They are asking for how much …?* “Are you ignoring me?”

I look up at him. “No, I’m trying to work. Why aren’t you doing the same?” I ask with a tight smile.

He shrugs. “Took the day off today,” he says simply.

I snort. “More like played hooky.”

He smiles and then nods his head once. “So Ashlyn. She was hot. Are you excited about seeing her tonight?” He wiggles his dark eyebrows.

I sit back in my seat, pinching the bridge of my nose with a heavy sigh. “I haven’t spoken to her since the day after she returned to Seattle. I’ve been busy with work, and I know she and Becca are busy tying up loose ends,” I admit.

He frowns. “Well, you’ll see her tonight. Gonna pick up where you left off?” He leans back in his seat with a cocky smile on his face as if he just told me a secret. “She seemed really into you. Think she’ll be at your beck and call?”

“I doubt that,” I say honestly. She’s been on my mind a lot since Florida. I have never had a woman touch me the way she did. She was exactly what I had needed, something different. Something wild yet also comfortable. Now that I’m back in New York, all the women seem to be incomparable to

her. The way she woke me up, the way she moaned when I placed my hands on her—everything about her arouses me.

I readjust my hardening cock in my slacks, and I clear my throat as thoughts of her and me that first night come to mind.

Her hand tightens in mine as I pull her away from the little bar on the beach. We stay silent as we make our way to the hotel, and my feet pick up the pace as we walk through the lobby to an open elevator. The moment the doors close, she turns to me and pushes my back up against the wall.

My hands go to her hair, and I lower my lips to hers, kissing her deeply as her hands go to my shorts. I moan into her mouth as she slides her hand down my shorts and wraps it around my long and hard cock. She starts to stroke it, and I spin us around and pin her back to the wall.

"Wait …" I say, pulling away from her lips. I yank her hands from my shorts and pin both of her hands above her head.

"I can't wait," she breathes, pressing her chest into mine.

A growl escapes my parted lips at how turned on she is. "Are you wet, baby?" I ask lowering my head to where my lips are almost touching hers.

Her eyes close, and she whimpers. "Yes." She presses her hips into mine, and she looks up at me through her long dark lashes. "God, I want you to fuck me. Please," she begs, and I tighten my hands around her wrists.

"I'm going to," I tell her. "But I wanna play with you first," I say with a smile. A woman like her, one who is already panting and begging, is the kind of woman you take your time with. You kiss them, lick them. You consume them to the point of bursting into flames with need. Then you give them exactly what they want...

"Ryder?"

I snap out of my memory as I look up at my father now standing in my office. "Yes, sir?" I ask, clearing my throat.

He looks down at his watch and then fixes his already straight black tie. "I'm flying out in five hours," he reminds me. "I need you to take care of the Mason contract by the end of the day."

I nod my head and point down at the papers on my desk. “That’s what I’m doing.” If people would just leave me alone and let me work.

He looks from me to Jaycent. “It looked like you were daydreaming about something,” he says as a matter-of-fact. “Get it done.” He takes a quick look around my office. “And clean this place up. It looks like a men’s locker room.” Then he exits, shutting the door behind him.

I sigh, and Jaycent chuckles. I’ve pretty much been living in my office for the last few days. I have suits strung over the back of my couch, and three different pairs of shoes over in the far corner. The door to my bathroom is open, and you can see my pajama pants from last night on the floor. That’s what happens when you live your job. “It looked to me, like you were thinking about a very hot blonde.”

I growl as I readjust my tight slacks again. I can’t help but remember her and what she made me feel. She is exactly what I’ve wanted in a town full of the same ol’ shit. I’m just not sure how well I will compete with New York. The men here will be begging for her company. And I’ll just be some guy she once had a piece of.

ASHLYN

I stand smashed between my mother and father; my cheeks hurt because I’ve been smiling so much the last ten minutes.

“Just one more,” my mother says as she brushes her blond hair off her shoulder while sniffing.

“Margaret, you have to quit crying or you’ll have red eyes in all the photos,” my father tells her as he straightens his back.

“I can’t help it,” she all but sobs. “I don’t want you to leave me.” She turns to face me and yanks me out of my dad’s arms.

I hug her tightly as I chuckle. “I’ll be back to visit soon, Mom,” I say, rubbing her back as we stand outside the airport.

“Visiting isn’t the same,” she cries. She pulls away from me quickly and looks over at Becca, who is standing in front of us with my mother’s phone, taking pictures. “You come here too.” She motions for her. Becca smiles as

she walks over to us, and we do a group hug. “I’m gonna miss you. I feel like I’m losing two girls.”

“Thank you for being so kind, Margaret,” Becca says as her eyes start to fill with tears. “I’m gonna miss you guys too.”

“Promise me you’ll come back to visit with Ashlyn?” She sniffs again.

“Of course.” A single tear rolls down her face.

My father walks over to us, takes my mother’s phone from Becca’s hand, and stops an older man as he walks by. “Excuse me, sir, but could you take a picture of us?”

“Absolutely,” he answers with a kind smile.

We all adjust ourselves and put our best smiles on for the camera, but I feel a pain in my chest because I’m about to jump on a plane and leave my parents. But this has always been my dream, and dreams won’t come true unless you follow them. And mine are taking me to New York.

The plane ride to New York was just as exhausting as the last couple of weeks have been. We spent most of our day either sitting on a plane or in an airport during layovers. By the time we exited our last plane in New York, I had a pounding headache and was ready to pass out in a bed.

“This airport is massive,” I say, dragging my carry-on bag behind me while I look around the very busy JFK. If not for Becca, I’m sure I would get lost. A few times.

“Yeah. You get used to it,” Becca says with a bright smile on her face. She’s gotten more and more chipper the closer we got to New York. Conner calling her last night is only a distant memory.

I blow the loose blond hairs that hang in my face and readjust the heavy purse over my shoulder, tilting my head from side to side, trying to stretch my stiff neck. My back is killing me from sitting on the multiple planes it took us to get here. I’m pretty sure staying up late last night and waking up early is taking a toll on me as well.

We walk what seems like forever and then we take a tram. Finally, we make it to the baggage claim, and I drop my purse on the floor and plop down on a bench. “I’m so tired,” I say, running my hands over my face. It’s got to be close to eleven at night.

She giggles. “You can get some rest as soon as we get home.”

I smile at how she calls our new place home and pull my phone out of my pocket. I see that I have three missed calls and ten text messages, all of them from my mother. I see that I have two hundred messages in our family FB chat that my aunt has named *my bitches*. My mother has threatened her for months to change that. If she knew how, she would do it herself, but she is technologically challenged. She still has issues trying to take a selfie.

I open it up to see they had started out talking about me, but when I didn’t respond, the conversation quickly turned to my cousin Angela. And she is clearly avoiding them. She’s the only one out of the eight of us in there who hasn’t read them, and I know as well as all the others that she is a social media whore.

I type them a quick message that we landed. I go on to remind my mother that I miss and love her too and that I will call her when we get to the apartment. I place my phone back in my purse when an annoying alarm sounds, warning us of our luggage, and then the belt begins to move. I sit there for another ten minutes while everyone else grabs their luggage, and of course, ours is the last to pop up. I literally cringe when Becca’s Louis Vuitton luggage bounces around on the conveyor belt. I reach over and pick hers up off the belt since I’m taller than she is and can reach them easier.

I’m pulling my last bag off the belt when I hear *his* voice.

“Welcome home, B.”

I drop the last heavy suitcase on the ground and look over my shoulder to see Becca hugging Ryder. I stare at him as he spins her around. He looks much different than he did just a week ago. When I saw him on the beach, he had looked like any other tourist with his shorts and muscle shirt. But right now, he stands out in a way that makes my mouth water and my heart rate speed up. He looks like a million dollars. Like a model who belongs on the cover of *GQ*. He’s wearing a dark gray tie that hangs loosely around his neck as if he undid it but forgot to remove it with a white button up shirt. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, exposing his muscular forearms. He’s wearing a black watch on his left wrist along with black slacks. His

dark hair is spiked messy yet looks like perfection. The sides cut short. His face freshly shaved.

He stops spinning her around, and his dark green eyes lock with mine. He smiles as he catches me staring at him. I check to make sure my mouth is closed and straighten my back but can't look away. He lets her go and then he's walking over to me. He's only a couple of feet from me, but it feels like seconds tick by as he makes his way to me.

"Hello, beautiful," he says as he slides his hand into my hair. I remain speechless as he tilts my head back, forcing me to look up at him. He touches me as if he doesn't even have to ask. I like that. His eyes search my face as a smirk grows across his face. "Just as beautiful as I remember," he says quietly before pressing his lips to mine.

Goose bumps break out over my body as his lips softly touch mine. My eyes grow heavy as if his lips have drugged me; unable to keep them open, they close, and I moan as he slides his tongue between my lips. My body instantly reacts to it as my tongue dances with his and takes my breath away. Without thought, I wrap my arms around his neck and moan into his mouth. His free hand wraps around my waist and pulls me closer to him. I tilt my head to the side and open my mouth a little more to allow him to deepen the kiss, and he doesn't disappoint.

We stand in the middle of JFK, making out like we're long-lost lovers. As if he's been off in battle, and I've been waiting back at home impatiently. He kisses me as if he already owns me, and I allow him to do it. His lips feel so good against mine. His mouth warm, his tongue soft. He holds me tightly to him as he reminds me just how good Florida felt over a week ago. And it's a good thing because my legs are starting to buckle. I can feel his arousal pressing against my lower stomach, and my thighs tighten as I remember how good he felt inside me. *Pull away, Ashlyn*, my mind demands, but like a rebel, my body begs him for more as I try and mold myself to him.

He slows down the kiss and pulls away. I open my heavy eyes to look up at him. "Ryder …" I breathe. "What… was that… for?" I find myself asking although I grip him tighter. I couldn't care less why he did it. Taking

a deep breath, the smell of a rich cologne hits me, and it makes my eyes flutter from the power behind it. Have you ever smelled something so good that it makes your mouth water? It's kinda like how your mouth reacts when you smell a pickle. His cologne has the same effect on me, and I can't wait to taste him again.

He smiles down at me like he knows how he is affecting me. "Everyone deserves a proper welcome to New York, sweetheart," he replies simply. I go to open my mouth, but he lets go of me and stands back. "Come on; let's get all the bags." Without question, he reaches down and grabs my three bags. I watch him throw one over his shoulder and turn, walking away from me as he pulls the other two behind him. My eyes go straight to his ass. The way his black slacks pull tightly against his perfectly sculptured ass … I fist my hands down at my side 'cause the crave to squeeze those cheeks is strong.

When I finally look away, I notice that Jaycent must have come with Ryder because he is helping Becca with her bags. "I can get those," I tell Ryder when I manage to pull myself out of my trance.

He snorts, looking back at me over his shoulder. "I know," he says with a wink and then stops to talk to Jaycent and Becca. I smile and follow him. My eyes continue to linger on his ass a little longer than they should, but I can't help it. It looks fucking fantastic in those tight black slacks. And his legs … The pants hug his thighs perfectly and flare out around his shiny black shoes. His white button up shirt pulls tightly on his shoulders as his muscles flex from holding and pulling my bags. I lick my lips, and a taste seems to linger that I didn't notice when I kissed him. Whiskey? Is that what made me react the way I did? Did that one kiss get me drunk? I shake my head, trying to get back to reality.

We make our way outside, and the guys walk up to a black Escalade. "We're not taking a cab?" I ask Becca.

"No," she says simply.

I bite my lower lip because I'm sure a car is much more than a taxi, and I don't have any cash on me at the moment. Becca steps off onto the pick-up lane, and Jaycent opens the back door for her. She crawls in, and he follows

her. I make my way to the back of the SUV as Ryder puts my last bag in. He shuts the back and turns to walk to the door. I place my hand on his arm and stop him. “How much is this?” I ask.

He smiles as if I said a joke. “I’m free, baby,” he says, taking a step to me.

I chuckle at his joke. “The car. How much is the car ride? I don’t have any cash on me. Do they take cards?”

“It won’t cost a thing.”

“I don’t understand.” No one drives people around for free.

He places his hand on my shoulder. “It won’t cost you a thing. This is my driver, Milton.” Then he spins me around and leads me to the door.

I want to ask him what he means by *his driver*? And *won’t cost me a thing*. But the tall buildings and bright lights of New York distract me as they light up the dark night.

I look out the window like a little kid in the candy store, amazed at all the incredibly large buildings. I’ve never even been to New York, but it looks nothing like it does in the movies. It looks so much more amazing, breathtaking. Buildings so tall, I can’t even see the tops of them. Buildings so big, I’m not sure how they were ever built this close to one another. I look at the clock on the dash, and it reads a little after midnight. It took us around nine hours to get here. Even with it being this late, crowds of people are still everywhere I look. And the traffic—I can see why Becca said most people take cabs. I would have terrible road rage if I had to drive myself around here.

“How was the flight?” I hear Ryder ask from beside me.

“Good,” I answer, not turning to look at him.

“You girls must be tired,” Jaycent adds. “I know flying wears me out.”

A building catches my eye that looks like a castle. It’s not as tall as the others, but it’s wider than most and has several different towers with black tinted glass. I mumble my answer as I look it over. “Something like that.”

They quit talking to me, letting me take in this beautiful city as we continue to our destination.

Twenty minutes later, the car comes to a stop, and I have to tilt my head back to look at the top of a white building with a black awning. “It’s so big,” I say in amazement.

“The biggest,” Ryder whispers in my ear. “One even considers me a sex God.”

I spin around and slap him in his hard chest, and he laughs. “Don’t get cocky,” I warn him.

We get out of the Escalade. Men are already waiting for us with a cart for our luggage. Ryder takes my hand, and I don’t pull away as he guides me up a set of stairs, while the men pushing the cart take a ramp to the side. Ryder opens the revolving glass door, allowing us to enter the lobby.

The floor is a light colored tile. Every fifth tile, the light colored is replaced with a dark brown to add some color. A desk sits to the right against the wall. Five men stand behind the counter. They all raise their hands and say their hellos to Ryder. I notice the last one, the youngest looking one, looks down at Ryder’s hand holding mine, and I don’t miss the surprise in his blue eyes.

Three men stand to the left dressed in all-black suits and ties, holding their hands behind their back. They each nod to us, and Ryder wishes them a good night by name. “It’s beautiful,” I say more to myself than anyone else.

We finally make it to the elevator back around a corner. I look at myself in the mirrored walls as the doors slide closed. I look like crap. I have no makeup on, and my hair is down but a mess from the plane rides. I look over at Ryder and Jaycent, who are laughing at something Becca said. They look so well put together. They both look business in their suits and ties. Even Becca is dressed nicely in a cute sundress. Her hair is fixed, and she has some mascara and lip-gloss on. *Did she have that on earlier?*

I look like some rat they just picked up in the sewer. I make the rest of the way up in silence, and I’m beginning to wonder how far we have to go when it finally dings and comes to a stop on the thirty-fifth floor.

The doors slide open, and I follow them off the elevator. Ryder’s still holding my hand, using his free hand to produce a key card out of the front

pocket of his slacks and slides it in. The door clicks, and Ryder shoves it open. Jaycent and Becca walk in first.

My mouth falls open as Ryder and I walk in. The apartment looks like something you would see on *Cribs*. It's bigger than any other house I have been in before. I definitely can't afford it. Hell, I probably can't even afford the elevator key card. I should have known. Becca's family is wealthy, after all. And I don't mean wealthy in the sense that they take vacations on the other side of the world. I mean they are wealthy as in billionaires. You wouldn't know it by looking at Becca because she's not that girl who wears a Prada purse on her shoulder with the heels to match. Her LV luggage that her mother gave her last year for her birthday might, though. But she grew up living in mansions. They had nannies and chefs. Her dad owns a multi-billion-dollar company, and I should have known that he wasn't gonna buy his daughter a small studio apartment.

"Something wrong?" Becca asks.

"Yes." I nod my head slowly. "How did we … I …" I lick my lips, which are all of a sudden dry as three sets of eyes stare at me curiously. "I can't live here," I finally say.

"Why not?" Ryder asks.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

RYDER

Her eyes bug out at my question. I take a step towards her and pull her to the side as Jaycent and Becca tour the apartment. “What’s wrong with it?” I ask her.

“What’s wrong with it?” she asks in disbelief. “How about it’s out of my price range,” she whispers harshly.

I laugh. “My father bought this for Becca. You don’t have to worry about paying rent.”

“I can’t even afford the electric bill,” she snaps.

“Ashlyn …”

She pulls away from me and walks very slowly over to the windows in the living room that overlook Manhattan. She very gently presses her hands to the glass. “I mean. Look at this view,” she says in awe. “Have you ever seen something as beautiful as this?”

Yes. *You.* Instead, I say, “It is breathtaking.” My eyes scan over her jeans and worn-out gray AC/DC t-shirt. Her blond hair is down, stopping at the middle of her back. It’s messy but looks like she spent time to get it that way. My eyes scan the shape of her ass and legs in her jeans until I get down to her black Chucks. Even up here in this fancy apartment, I think of the beach. I can still hear the rainfall as I hold her in my arms on that balcony. I clear my throat as my dick starts to harden.

“You made that sound like it was a problem,” I say, making my way next to her.

She turns to face me, and I look down at her face. Her eyes are a little red and her shoulders slump. Even tired, she’s still the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen. The lights from the buildings around us shine on her face. They light up her crystal blue eyes like shining stars. I can’t help myself as I

reach up and run my knuckles down the side of her soft skin. She pulls away from me.

“What’s wrong?” I ask her.

“I don’t belong in a place like this.” Her eyes scan the tan and white furniture that you would see on the cover of a magazine. The extravagant paintings my mother had bought at a photo gallery hang on the tan walls. That’s one thing my mother did for her. She fully furnished this apartment for Becca. But I know my sister better than my mother does because this is not how my sister would have decorated *her* apartment.

“Why would you say that?”

“I’m not like you, Ryder.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

She runs a hand through her hair as she sighs. “I didn’t grow up with nannies, prep school, or in the tabloids. This …” She holds her hands out to her sides and opens them wide. “People like me don’t belong in places like this.”

“Why do you keep saying you don’t belong here?” I ask frowning.

“I can’t afford it.”

“I told you that you don’t have to pay for it.” Her jaw sharpens as if grinding her teeth. “If it makes you feel any better, Becca didn’t want this place either,” I say truthfully. She isn’t like me. She doesn’t have to have the fastest car. Or spend thousands a week on clothes. She never was that way. She feels like that money is our parents’ and not hers to use. I may have a trust fund, but I don’t touch it. I’ve worked my ass off to get to where I am today.

“I was in my dad’s office when he told Becca over the phone that he had bought her an apartment in Manhattan. The first thing she asked him was the address. That told her where it was and how much it cost him. She told him thank you, of course, but even I could tell she wasn’t happy.”

She places her hands on her hips. “So this is why Becca didn’t show me pictures of our place. ‘Cause she knew I wouldn’t live here.”

I place my hand on her face, guiding her head back to where she has to look up at me. “It’s paid for. No worries. I promise.”

“I’m not one to live off someone else, Ryder.”

“I don’t think that.”

“Then what were you thinking?” she growls.

“Honestly. I think you are overreacting.”

Her eyes narrow on me, and she takes a step back. “I’m not in the mood to do this with you, right now.”

“Do what?” This woman confuses the hell out of me. I shouldn’t care that she isn’t throwing herself at me like that first night in Panama City. Why did I think she was going to rip her clothes off and spread her legs for me? And why can’t I get that image out of my head? Instead, we’re arguing about money.

“Argue with you about something you won’t understand.” She goes to walk away from me, but I move quickly to stand in front of her to block her.

“Understand what exactly?”

She runs a hand through her hair as she lets out a long breath. “Look, I’m just tired. I just need to go to bed.”

I want to ask her to come up to my apartment, but I know she’ll turn me down. I know the difference between a hint and someone flat out denying you. And her statement was not an invitation for me to offer her a night in my bed.

“Okay. I’ll take your things to your room, and you can get some rest.”

She turns back to look out the window. “I can do it,” she says flatly, and I wait for her eyes to glaze over as she stares out over the city before I make my move and put her things in her room. She can be mad at me all she wants, but it’s gonna be for being a gentleman. Somehow, I knew it was gonna be harder than I wanted it to be.

ASHLYN

Nothing but buildings for miles. It’s well after midnight, but the city is lit up with lights from the windows of all the buildings. Cabs below look like ants as they slip in and out of traffic.

I lift my hands and place them on the floor-to-ceiling glass windows. The coolness of being this high up makes me break out in goose bumps. Placing my forehead on the window, I sigh. It's beautiful and terrifying at the same time.

I look out over the city in amazement. It takes my breath away as I look at the wonderful view.

Turning around, I take in the apartment. It is like a fairy tale. The floors are white hardwood with a light gray insert. I can see the kitchen and dining room from where I stand. The dining room table has a tall glass vase with fresh red roses in it. Becca's mother must have put them there for her. The vase sits on a glass kitchen table. Eight white high back chairs surround the table. The closer I look; I can see silver beads outline them. A silver chandelier hangs over the table.

The kitchen is just as spectacular. White cabinets and light gray countertops. I look down at my feet to the white hardwood floors and realize I still have my shoes on. I quickly take them off and pick them up in my hands, afraid I will dirty up the large gray and blue rug that covers the span of the living room. Two white couches are sitting up against the window. A soft yellow and blue throw pillow decorate the couches, giving the room just a pop of color.

"Okay, everything is put in your room," Ryder says, coming up to me.

"Thank you," I say although I shouldn't have let him do it.

He waves off my appreciation as he looks around the apartment. "Where are Becca and Jaycent?" he wonders aloud.

"I don't know," I say turning back to look out the window. I stiffen when I feel his hand on my shoulder.

He notices it and turns me around. "Hey, you okay?" He reaches up and places his hand on my face. I want to pull away but find myself leaning into it.

I nod. "Just tired. It's been a long day."

He smiles softly. "You need to get some rest. You have an interview tomorrow, don't you?"

"Yeah." Somehow, I had forgotten that until just now.

He pulls away from my face and grabs my hand. “Come on. I’ll show you to your room.”

I allow him to lead me out of the living room and down a short hallway. He opens the door to the right, and I gasp at what I see. “This is your room,” he says, clearly unaffected by what I see. “I put your bags in your closet.” He points over at the door to the left.

I take a step into the bedroom, as I look around dazed. A four-post bed sits up against the far wall. To the right, where a wall should be, is nothing but floor-to-ceiling windows. Lights from the surrounding buildings light up my room just as they did the living room.

“There are so many windows,” I say more to myself than anyone else.

Ryder comes to stand beside me. “You don’t like them?”

“The city is beautiful; of course, I like them.”

He chuckles as he goes over to the far wall. “Well, just in case. I can fix that.” He presses a button, and a soft humming sound fills the room. I look up and see a set of dark gray curtains move from side to side as they meet in the middle, covering us in darkness. Ryder then flips a light switch, lighting up the room.

“That better?”

I turn to face him. “Thanks,” I say, feeling uncomfortable all of a sudden. I nervously push some loose blond hairs behind my ear. “Thanks again for the help,” I tell him.

He leans up against the wall and places his arms over his chest. His muscles in his upper arms stretch his already tight white button up shirt, and I can’t help but look at the way his black slacks hang low on his narrow hips. A black belt holds them up, and I feel a blush creep up when I realize it’s the one from Florida. “Are you okay?” he asks, his green eyes searching mine.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I ask, swallowing nervously.

He pushes off the wall and walks to me slowly as if he’s trying to gauge my reaction to him. I want to fan myself but refrain; I don’t want to look like an idiot.

He stops in front of me and looks down at me. He leans down, and I hold my breath thinking that he's gonna kiss me again. If he kisses me like he did at the airport, I'm fucked. I'll throw him down onto this perfectly made bed and rip all the sheets off of it to have my way with him.

Instead, he leans down and kisses me softly on my forehead. "Get some sleep, Ashlyn. You have a busy day tomorrow," he whispers and then he walks out of my bedroom without looking back.

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After I called my mother and listened to her cry about how much she missed me already, I thought about going to bed. But even though I was tired as shit, I stayed up all night on my laptop Googling Ryder. I'm not sure why I did it, but it was bothering me. Him all of a sudden so close. So affectionate. I wanted to know who I was dealing with. A player? A manwhore?

What I found was worse than that. I saw pictures of him at events his company throws. Pictures of him doing charity work at shelters. Pictures of him in front of construction sites where I'm guessing his dad's company had bought property and was either tearing a building down or about to build a new one. In every one, he was smiling and always without a beautiful woman on his side. And I hate that fact. At least if he was a player, I would know how to handle that. But it seems that his job takes up his entire life. I thought he was exaggerating when we were up late talking in Panama City about him traveling the world.

Now, I'm not sure how to handle myself around him. It's like, within a second, he became this billionaire sex God and he can't keep his hands off me. I'm afraid that I'm not gonna be able to keep mine off him and that is a big problem.

I decide to look up their parents. I've known Becca for four years, and we've lived together for three of those. But we didn't have a high-rise apartment. We shared a tiny apartment on campus. I knew she was rich but only because of Conner. That little bitch would throw her last name around

all the time to try to get his way, even though it rarely worked. Some looked at him like he was making it up, and others looked at him like he was drunk. Bradley and I had gone out to eat with them one night; our waiter sucked, and our food was cold when we finally got it. He stood and threw his plate to the ground, yelling out and I quote, he was there with *the* Becca O'Kane. I rolled my eyes while Becca silently cried in embarrassment. What did he expect? For them to kiss his shoes cause his girlfriend's father was a billionaire? I really think that's the only reason he was ever with her, but I'll never tell her that.

I've never asked Becca about her family's finances. I know she and Ryder both have trust funds from their late grandfather, but they both still work. I decided to look up their father's net worth and found he is five hundred on the Forbes list. I'm not surprised by that either. They're billionaires, after all. And when I say billionaires, I mean worth a little over three billion, to be exact. My parents are not poor. They do pretty well for themselves, but they're nowhere near as well off as her parents are.

I place my hand over my mouth to cover up my yawn. I'm so tired after staying up all night. I lie in my new bed as I stare up at the ceiling, thinking over what I learned throughout the night. My eyes are heavy, my mind still turns over what I learned, and it makes my stomach turn. I had opened my curtains after Ryder left last night 'cause I wanted to see the city that I've always longed to experience. Now, the sun shines in through the windows.

I sit straight up when I hear someone in the kitchen. I jump out of bed and make my way through the massive apartment, just looking at places for me to dirty it up with my laundry and other crap. I find Becca in the kitchen making a pot of coffee. "Why didn't you tell me?" I demand.

She looks up at me and yawns. "Excuse me?"

"Why didn't you tell me about our apartment?"

She sighs heavily. "I didn't want to scare you off, and you leave," she answers quietly. "I'm sorry; I should have told you."

I run a hand through my hair as I look around the place that I'm going to call home for the next few months. It's the most beautiful view I've ever seen, yet it makes me sick to my stomach. "What's wrong?" she asks.

“I can’t afford this, Becca.” I sigh.

“You don’t have to pay for anything,” she assures me.

“So what?” I raise my arms out to the side. “I freeload off you? I’m not like that, Becca.”

She places her coffee cup on the counter and smiles softly. “I know you’re not, Ashlyn and that’s why I wanted you to live here with me.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

Her shoulders slump. “He just called me one day last month and said he bought me an apartment.” She tells me the same thing that Ryder told me last night. “I couldn’t tell him no. And he wouldn’t have let me anyway. I didn’t wanna live here alone, so I asked about having a roomate. He said as long as it wasn’t a guy that was fine. I knew I wanted you to be here with me. You’re my best friend, Ashlyn.”

“Why would he spend so much money on an apartment that you wouldn’t want?” Sounds like a waste of money to me.

“That’s how my dad works. Ryder has an apartment here, and I knew he would want me near him.” She shrugs.

I had somehow forgotten that Ryder also lives here, but it makes me smile. *No! I must stay away from him.* “So your dad bought your brother an apartment here, and he wanted you to live next to him?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Ryder bought his own apartment two years ago. But yes, I guess that’s why my father wanted me at this location.”

“And what are the odds that one just became available the same time that you were graduating college?”

She laughs. “The odds are non-existent. No one sells once they have an apartment here at the Q’s. Even when they pass away, their apartment goes to their next of kin.” These apartments go anywhere from one million to twelve million dollars. I also looked that up last night. I’m just full of information now.

“So what? He paid someone to make them move?” With three billion dollars, I’m sure you can get whatever you want.

“No.” Her eyes fall to the counter and then she looks over at the formal dining room area.

“What is it?” I ask, taking a step toward her.

“The building … my father owns the building, Ashlyn,” she says softly.

“Oh.” Should have seen that one coming. When I was digging around on the web last night, I saw where he owns pretty much half of Manhattan.

“I’m sorry I never told you, but I knew you’d hate living here with me and find another apartment before I could explain myself.”

I sigh. “And you would have been correct.” I spread my arms out wide, gesturing to the apartment. “What am I supposed to do about this?”

She gives me a soft smile. “It will be fine. I promise. You don’t need to worry about money. Or paying any bills. I have them covered.”

“I don’t understand what that means exactly. I’m not going to live somewhere for free, Becca. When you told me you had a place and wanted me to move in with you, you told me that my cost was going to be five hundred a month.”

She bites her bottom lip as her green eyes dart around the room. “What?” I growl.

“That was a lie too,” she whispers.

“Of course, it was,” I snap. “Because five hundred dollars won’t pay for anything in this place.”

“It’s free for us. My father is taking care of it.”

I’m not one to live above my means. I wanted to move to New York more than anything after graduation, and I was fully prepared to live in a small ass apartment. But this? An apartment that was bigger than my childhood home …? “I don’t know …”

“Please,” she begs as she comes around the kitchen. “Please, stay here with me, Ashlyn. Conner is gone. I’ve been gone for four years and haven’t kept in touch with any of my friends from here because Conner didn’t like any of them. And honestly, they were never friends to begin with. Please tell me that you will stay here with me.” She drops her eyes to the floor. “Because I’m not ready to be alone.”

I let out a sigh as I run a hand down my face. I’m not a freeloader. I believe in paying my part, but I do have some money saved up. I have twenty five thousand dollars to be exact. Selling my car helped with that. I

won’t leave her, and she knows that. I just wish she had told me what I was walking into. “I’ll stay,” I say reluctantly. She looks up at me and smiles. “On one condition,” I add.

“Name it,”

“No more secrets.”

“Deal.”

I sit down on the barstool in the kitchen and place my head in my hands. “What does your father like?”

“What do you mean?”

I lift my head and drop my hand. “Alcohol. What kind of alcohol does he like?”

“Scotch. But what does that have to do with anything?”

“I wanna buy him a bottle for letting me move in here with you.” It’s the least I can do for him giving me a place to stay. Not to mention it’s better than anything I’ve ever seen before.

“You don’t wanna do that,” she says slowly.

I frown. “Why not?”

“It’s like forty thousand dollars.”

My eyes bug out, and my mouth falls open. “For scotch?” Where the hell does he get his scotch, for Christ’s sake?

She smiles softly and speaks. “I’m sorry. It’s a fifty-year-old scotch. His taste is very expensive in all areas.”

“I’m starting to see that,” I mumble to myself.

She reaches across the counter and grabs my hand. “You don’t need to get him anything, honestly. Don’t worry about it.”

I’m not the kind of person who lets others give me things without returning the favor. I squeeze her hand back before I release it, get up, and walk back to my room. I’m on a mission.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

RYDER

I sit behind my desk and pull my phone out of the pocket of my slacks. I send a quick text to Ashlyn.

Me: *How did you sleep last night?*

She reads it and responds almost instantly.

Ashlyn: *I didn't.*

I go to text her again, but my door opens. My father walks in, running a hand through his hair. "I just got a call from St. Claire. He just got word that Westcott is looking for a buyer for his hotel in Miami."

My brows rise. "Why would St. Claire inform us? He's competition." St. Claire and my father go way back. They went to college together, and just like my father owns half of Manhattan, St. Claire owns half of Chicago.

He shakes his head as if confused by the information as well. "Not sure. But I'm sending you to Florida."

"When?" I ask.

"In two weeks," he states and then starts to walk out.

"Why not today?" I ask confused. "If Westcott is looking for a buyer, we need to hit before others find out."

"No. We wait for it. Let him decide that he is a hundred percent sure he wants to sell. If we move now, others will find out that we gave him an offer. If what St. Claire said is true, he's not a hundred percent yet. We need to hit when he's desperate, not just considering it."

I nod in understanding. "Okay. Two weeks it is then."

“Did you pick up your sister and Ashlyn last night?” he asks, changing the subject.

“Yes, sir.”

“Did Becca like the apartment?”

“Loved it,” I lie. I know that’s not my sister’s idea of an apartment. She hates high-rises. She also hates the fact that my father spent one point two million dollars on a place for her. And not to mention how Ashlyn reacted.

“Good. I’m glad you’re close to her in case they need anything,” he says.

He goes to speak, but my phone dings, letting me know I have another message. “Well, I’ll leave you to it,” he states before turning around and walking out.

I look down at my phone with a smile, thinking it is Ashlyn, but frown when I see it’s not.

Vicki: *Hey, babe. Haven’t heard from you since your birthday. How about we do dinner this weekend?*

I sigh as I sit down in my chair. I type back a short but to the point response.

Me: *Can’t, have plans.*

She texts me back, but I don’t even bother to take the time to read it. It’s just gonna be a message with her picking another date. And no matter when it is, I know I’m busy. She needs to get the hint. If a man doesn’t message you, he doesn’t want to be with you.

Instead, I lean over and pick up my phone on my desk and dial a familiar number. A voice that I’ve known all of my life answers. I smile at her voice and lean back in my chair. “Hey, beautiful. It’s been a long time.”

Laughter follows. “Ryder. What are you doing?”

“How did you know it was me?” I ask in surprise.

“I would know that voice anywhere. What can I do for you?”

I smile. “Funny you should ask …”

ASHLYN

I place my phone in my purse as I come up to the smaller brick building. It just so happens that our apartment building is only three blocks from Talia's Gallery.

I open the glass doors and smile as I look around the building. Bright white walls with black pillars support the structure. A winding staircase is to the right. A desk is to the left, and I walk over to it. A man with blond hair that is slicked to the left looks up and sees me.

"Hello, ma'am." He smiles as he folds his hands on the desk. "How may I help you?" he asks sweetly.

"Hello. My name is Ashlyn Whitaker. I have a ten o'clock meeting with Lauren."

"Oh, yes." His face lights up even more. "Ms. Whitaker. Please, have a seat"—he gestures to a bright red leather couch—"and I will notify her that you have arrived."

"Thank you." I walk over to the couch and sit down, placing my purse on my lap. I grip it tightly and notice that my hands are sweaty. I rub them on my black pencil skirt, hoping that it helps. I'd hate to shake her hand and have mine feel sweaty.

"Can I get you any coffee or a water?" the man behind the desk asks me. "Maybe a cappuccino?"

"No. Thank you. I'm fine," I assure him.

"You're welcome, sweetie. She will be down momentarily."

I start to dig into my purse as I hear my phone going off. I see Bradley is calling me. I ignore the call and send him a quick text.

Me: *Can't talk right now. At my interview. Will call you afterward.*

I place my phone on silent and then throw it into my purse.

"Ms. Whitaker."

I look up to see a woman walking down the winding staircase. She has her dark red hair up in a tight bun. She has on a black dress that reaches her

knees and a pair of black and white bowtie heels that I would love to have.

She reaches the last step, and I stand. “Hello, Mrs. Mills,” I say, meeting her halfway and reaching out my hand. “Thank you for taking the time to meet with me.”

She nods her head. “Absolutely,” she says, smiling warmly. She places her hand in mine and then looks at the guy at the front desk. “Thomas. Please hold my calls.”

He nods, and then she gestures to the stairs. “Please. Let’s take this to my office.”

I follow her up the winding staircase as she makes small talk. “So how long have you been in New York?”

“I just arrived yesterday.”

“Oh, wow. How do you like it so far?”

“It’s very overwhelming,” I say honestly, and she laughs.

“I can understand that,” she says as we come to the top of the stairs.

“Are you from here?” I wonder.

“Born and raised,” she says proudly.

I follow her down a hallway and into an office, she gestures for me to sit. “Now, I’m gonna be honest with you, Ashlyn. We would like someone who has two years of experience.”

I straighten my back as I cross my right leg over my left. “May I ask why you agreed to meet with me then?” I ask truthfully.

She looks surprised by my question. “Because your professor had nothing but good things to say about you. And there were a lot.”

I smile. “Well, every teacher has a favorite student.”

She laughs at that. “Yes, they do.” She links her hands together and rests them on her desk. “I was also told that you have connections.”

I try to hide my smile but fail. “Connections?” I try to sound as if I’m clueless. I’m not.

She nods. “There is an artist I’m interested in. I’ve seen the work online, and I’d love to showcase it in our gallery. I was told that you know said artist.”

“I don’t know them personally, but I know their work.”

She smiles as if that pleases her. “I was told that you know how to reach out. Make them an offer.”

“I can.”

“Excellent,” she says with a bright smile. “May I?” she asks, looking down at the resume on my lap now that I passed that test.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say, handing it to her.

She opens it up and silently reads over it. Her brows lift, and she smiles. Then she closes it. Wow. That didn’t take long. “You worked at The Fort Gallery in Seattle?”

“I did an internship there.”

“Very impressive,” she says with a head nod. “What all did your internship entail? Did they keep you on the computer or did you work with the art?”

“A little bit of both,” I say honestly. “I started out at the desk. Then over time, I moved to the art.”

She opens the resume up and scans over it again. “You were there for three years?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That’s a long time for an internship,” she says, sounding skeptical.

“After six months, they hired me on as a full-time employee,” I inform her.

“You went to school full time and worked full time?” she questions, and I nod. “Impressive.” I smile proudly. “Where do you see yourself in five years, Ms. Whitaker?”

“I want to run my own gallery.”

“Wow. Those are big plans for five years.”

“I understand that, but I also know what I’m capable of. And I am the type of person who dreams big and does whatever it takes to make them come true.”

She tilts her head to the side as she considers what to ask me next. “Do you have any question for me?” she finally asks.

“Yes. I was wondering how your relationship with your artists works?” Her brows arch. “When showcasing their work, do you show their work at

openings, sell a few pieces, and then pack up what is left and send them a check? Or do you represent them under contract, showcasing their art throughout the gallery until their contract is up?”

She sits back in her seat and places her hands on her lap with a smile on her lips. “We are very versatile here. Our sole intention is to cater to the artist. And what will work for one may not work for another. Those who are interested in a contract are offered one. But it is not required, if they choose not to.”

I nod. “What is a typical work day consist of?”

“Well, honestly, that is hard to define. Starting out, I would have you helping Thomas at the front desk, answering phones and working on the computer. I would also have you in the back, packaging and unpacking art. If we have an event coming up, I would like your input on showcasing and marketing strategies.”

My eyes widen. “That is a very wide variety.”

She nods. “Yes, Ms. Whitaker. Here at Talia’s, we like all hands on deck. We are very versatile in the art industry. And that will come into play when opening your own gallery,” she says with a smile.

***

An hour after my interview, I find myself walking out of a liquor store in downtown Manhattan with a smile on my face. I researched the name of the scotch that Becca told me and made a shit ton of phone calls until I found what I was looking for. Turns out, the scotch that Mr. O’Kane prefers is not sold in any given liquor store. Of course not, that would make my life too easy. But after my tenth call to local stores, I spoke to a man who was very helpful and told me of this kind that is just like it and only costs one hundred and fifty dollars. However, he did fail to mention that it was the size of one shot, but I went ahead and bought it anyway. I was running out of options, and I wasn’t gonna change my mind.

A cab comes to a stop in front of me, and I open up the back door to get in. “Where to?” the man in the driver seat asks.

I bite my bottom lip as I look down at my phone. Shit. I don’t know where he works at. “One sec …” I go to Google and type in. “O’Kane …”

He stomps on the gas, making my body slam into the backseat. My phone goes flying to the floor. “Excuse me?” I growl, rubbing my head. “Where are we going?” I demand as he makes his way through traffic. Other cars honk at us, and I quickly reach for my seat belt after grabbing my phone.

“You said O’Kane, so I’m taking you to O’Kane’s,” he answers as he swerves to the right and jumps on a new road.

I’m about to ask him how he knows what I’m talking about, but I decide not to. Becca’s family is obviously well-known in this town. Makes sense, being that he owns half of it.

“Learn how to drive,” I growl as I get out of the car when he finally comes to a stop.

“New to New York, huh?” He laughs as he raises his hand and snaps his fingers. “You’ll get used to it.”

I throw the cash into the cab through the front window, and he peels off, tires squealing.

I turn around and look up at a tall building that seems to reach the sky. People pass by me as if they’ve never seen something this beautiful. The glass is tinted black, and the entire structure twists as it goes up. As if the sky itself is pulling it up from the ground.

Someone bumps into me. He doesn’t even stop his phone conversation to say he’s sorry, but it does knock me out of my trance. I straighten my back and walk to the big glass doors. A man dressed in a black and white suit bows his head to me. “Good day, ma’am.”

“Good day, sir,” I reply as he opens the door for me. I turn and say, “Thank you,” and he nods his head to me once again.

“My pleasure, ma’am.”

I come to another stop as laughter and conversation fills my ears. I take in the black marble floor and dark gray walls along with the silver paintings that are bigger than some garage doors. It’s gorgeous. Breathtaking. I’m so

entranced that it takes a few seconds for the man standing next to me to get my attention.

“Hello,” I say, finally looking over at him.

A man smiles softly. His dark brown eyes and dark brown hair looks familiar. “Ashlyn. Can I be of some assistance?”

“You know my name?” I ask confused.

“I picked you up from the airport yesterday, ma’am,” he says matter-of-factly.

Oh, that’s why he looks familiar. He was Ryder’s driver. I was too busy paying attention to New York to take note of the driver.

“Are you here to visit Mr. O’Kane?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Would you like me to show you up, or would you like to wait here with me for him?” My brows pull together in confusion. “He called down minutes ago for me to wait for him. He will be down shortly.”

He called down for him? Didn’t Ryder say he was *his* driver? Does his father use the same man? “Who exactly are you waiting for?” I decide to ask.

“Ryder.”

Thought so. I give him a smile. “I’m not here to see Ryder.”

The smile drops off his face as he realizes I’m here to see Ryder’s father. “Oh dear, I’m so sorry,” he says quickly.

I laugh softly. “No need to be sorry. I wasn’t very clear.” I forget that they both work together.

“Here. Here.” He takes me by my upper arm and starts to pull me toward the elevators. “I will take you to Mr. O’Kane.”

“You don’t have to do that.” I don’t want him to get in trouble if Ryder comes down here, and he isn’t here.

He waves his free hand in the air. “I must,” he assures me.

We get into an elevator, and he presses the seventy-fifth floor. “Wow. That’s really up there,” I say.

“It doesn’t take as long as you would think,” he assures me.

People come and go as we stop on what feels like every floor. I'm looking down at my black pencil skirt and making sure that my white blouse is tucked in neatly. "We're here," he announces, and I look up from my outfit just as the doors slide open.

I walk off the elevator as I adjust my purse on my shoulder. "Thank you so much."

"Anytime, ma'am."

I smile. So proper. "Please, call me Ashlyn."

He nods. "Ashlyn."

"Mr. …?"

"Milton."

"Thanks, Mr. Milton."

He shakes his head as he steps off the elevator. "Just Milton."

I reach out my right hand, and he places his in mine. "It was nice to officially meet you, Milton. And again, thank you."

"My pleasure, Ashlyn."

I release his hand and turn around. All of a sudden, I realize I still have no clue where I am going. A pretty blonde sits at a desk to my right, but she has a headset on along with a desk phone in her hand as she speaks quickly and authoritatively. I probably came at a bad time. It's a little after five now, and I'm sure everyone is trying to get out of here for the day.

"Do you know where his office is?"

I spin around to see that Milton is still standing outside the elevator. "I do not," I admit with a shaky smile. "I'm afraid I'm very unprepared today."

He laughs at that. "It happens. Follow me." I follow him as he leads me past the desk of the pretty blonde. She doesn't even bother to look up at us as she lays down the desk phone and then tells the person on her headset to hold for Mr. O'Kane. And I instantly feel awkward. I should have never come to his workplace. I should have had Becca just take me to her parents' house tonight. A man who has this much money and this big of a business doesn't have time for a visit from me. He probably has to turn people away all the time.

Milton comes to a stop and knocks on a black door that reads Timothy O'Kane, CEO. "Come in," I hear a deep voice respond from the other side of it.

Milton opens the door and clears his throat. "Mr. O'Kane."

"Milton. What can I do for you?" I hear him ask.

"I have brought you a visitor," he announces and then steps to the side.

I watch as Mr. O'Kane stands from his chair. He buttons the button on his dark gray suit jacket and comes around his desk as a warm smile spreads across his face. "Ashlyn, what a surprise. To what do I owe this pleasure?"

In the four years I have known Becca, I have only met her father once. That was two weeks ago at our college graduation. And it was very brief. From what Becca has told me, he is married to his work. He eats, breathes, and lives this company. But hey, who else is gonna make him a billionaire? All that money must be addicting. I've met her mother five times. She came to Seattle every year on Becca's birthday and then for graduation. Every time she left, Becca was in tears. Not because she missed her but because her mother would remind her every day that she was making a mistake by living her life how Becca wanted instead of how she wanted. *She's a bitch.* "Hello, sir. I hope I'm not bothering you. I should have called first," I say, feeling stupid now that I think of it. I just interrupted his workday to give him a fucking shot of scotch. *So stupid.*

"Oh, no problem at all. Please"—he points at the high back white studded chair that sits in front of his desk—"have a seat. I have a few minutes to spare."

"I will leave you two to it," Milton says as he starts to walk to the door.

"Thanks again, Milton," I say to him.

He nods. "Ryder will be a few more minutes, Milton," Mr. O'Kane tells him. "He is in a meeting at the moment."

Milton nods his head and then walks out, shutting the door behind him.

"What can I do for you, Ashlyn?" he asks as he undoes the button on his jacket and sits back down.

I take a deep, calming breath. "I'm new to all of this," I say honestly.

“Yes. Becca told me that you have never been to New York before. What do you think so far?”

“Well, the cab drivers are a death trap. And every building I see makes me feel smaller and smaller.”

He laughs at those statements. “You get used to it.”

That’s what the cab driver told me. “But that’s not what I was referring to when I said I’m not used to all of this.”

He leans back in his chair and places his right ankle on top of his left knee. “What are you referring to then?”

I raise my hands out to my sides, gesturing to his office. He has artifacts that hang from the wall and diplomas that sit above a large red leather couch. Floor-to-ceiling windows make up the back wall, allowing me to see over Manhattan. Buildings for miles and beautiful blue water that I’m guessing is the Hudson River from where his office sits. To the right of those buildings, you can see Central Park. “It’s beautiful. But too much.” I look down at my purse and sigh that I’m here to give the man scotch that isn’t even gonna be worth drinking. “I didn’t know I would be living in such an extravagant place,” I admit.

“Becca didn’t tell you?” he asks confused.

“No.” I shake my head. “Mr. O’Kane.” He doesn’t correct me to call him Timothy. “I can’t even afford the key card for the elevator, let alone—”

He holds up his hand, and I immediately stop talking. “Ashlyn, I assure you, you have nothing to worry about when it comes to finances.”

“I won’t live off someone else. I was not raised that way.” I shake my head. “I Googled as much info about the apartment building last night, and it was way more than I’ll ever make in a lifetime.”

He smiles thoughtfully. “You are a lot like me.”

I raise my right eyebrow. Did he not hear what I just said? “How is that?” It seems like he built the kingdom, and I’m the peasant begging for a scrap of bread.

“Just like you, I also did some research myself.”

“You Googled … what?”

“Your parents,” he admits shamelessly.

I softly laugh. “I’m sorry, Mr. O’Kane, but you will not find their financial status on the web.”

“That may be true, but that’s not what I was looking for.” I frown. “Every time I spoke to my only daughter, she would go on and on about her best friend and how much her parents did for her. You know I spoke to them last week.”

“My parents?” I ask as my mouth dropped open.

He nods. “Yes. They called me. They wanted to know what they owed me for offering to let you stay with Becca, and I told them nothing. They insisted to the point it became offensive.” He chuckles. “They are very good people.”

I smile with pride. “They are.”

He drops his foot and stands from his chair. He comes to sit in the matching chair beside mine. “I didn’t get to where I am today without being a ruthless shark, but when it comes to family, I do my best to help in any way I can. And you and your parents are like family to me.” That surprises me.

I place a piece of hair behind my ear. “I’m sorry if this sounds ungrateful, but talking to them one time doesn’t mean that you know them, sir.”

He doesn’t take offense; he just smiles bigger. “It wasn’t talking to them that made them family. It was talking to Becca. I didn’t want my little girl to go to school in Seattle, but I kept my mouth shut. It was my wife who tried to keep her here.” He sighs. “But she was an adult, and I had to let her make her own decisions. I remember the first call I made to her like it was yesterday. She was crying. She had been there for maybe a week, and Conner had upset her. She sounded like she was at a bar, and it was loud. I told her she was coming home immediately. That if she didn’t put her ass on a plane, then I was sending a private jet to bring her home. She calmed down and talked me into giving her one more week.

When I spoke to her that following week, she sounded like a different person. She didn’t mention Conner once. All she could talk about was her new best friend and how she spent the week with her and her family.” He pats my hand as it sits on my knee. “You guys took her in like she was one

of you, and I will do the same for you here." He stands abruptly and walks back to his desk. He sits down. "Don't worry about money. All you need to worry about is what you plan on doing next with your life. You're fresh out of college. Have some fun."

I run a hand through my hair. "I just don't want you to think that I'm taking advantage of my situation. Becca is my best friend and …"

"And that's all that matters."

His desk phone rings, and he reaches over and presses a button, turning on the speaker, and then I hear a woman's voice. "Mr. O'Kane. William's on line three."

"Thank you, Jessica," he says and then looks at me. "I'm sorry, but I must take this."

I stand. "Sure," I say quickly. I was lucky to get this amount of time with him. I dig through my purse. "I wanted to get you something for your gratitude." I pull out the little bottle and place it on his desk. He looks down at it and smiles brightly as if it's the forty-thousand-dollar scotch that he actually drinks. "I know it's not much …"

"It's very thoughtful." He nods. "You shouldn't have but thank you."

I take a step back toward the door. "Thank you for everything. And again, I'm sorry to have bothered you."

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

RYDER

I stand at the front of the conference table. I have a man from China on speakerphone for the other five people sitting in the room to hear when I see my driver Milton walk by through the glass wall.

“Mr. Townsen, I think that timing is very doable,” I say, wondering why he is up here.

“Thanks, Ryder. I would like to have the building permit by the end of the week.”

That won’t be a problem. “Once you get it, let me know, and I will contact the builder and make sure that the site is ready for you to break ground.” My father has partnered with Townsen, and they are building condos in the Alps.

We hang up, and I look at my men. “That’s all, gentlemen.” I pick up my file, open the glass door as they holler at me, and walk quickly down the hallway. I drop the closed file onto Kelly’s desk. “Milton?” I call out as he stands, waiting for the elevator to open, dressed in black slacks and a crisp black button-down. He turns to face me. He smiles, his dimples showing. His soft brown eyes land on mine. Milton and I go way back. He has been a part of my life for over twelve years now. He’s like my second dad.

“Sorry. My meeting ran a little later than I expected.” I apologize for making him wait.

He waves it off. “No worries. I had to bring Ashlyn up here. I’m going __”

“Ashlyn?” I interrupt him. I only know one Ashlyn, and she has been on my mind all morning.

He nods. “Yes, sir. She wanted to meet with your father.”

The elevator dings, and I smile. “I’ll be down in a moment, Milton.” I turn around and walk back down the hallway to my father’s office. I open the door without knocking to find my dad behind his desk and Ashlyn walking to the door. I pause as I look at her. I’ve never seen her dressed in business attire. She has a tight black skirt on that hugs her thin waist and curvy hips. It stops just above her knees. It’s high waisted, and she has a white blouse tucked in with a thin black belt. Her black high heels top off her look and make my mouth water. Her blond hair is down and in big curls. She’s wearing red lipstick, and my first thought is the red print her lips would leave around my cock. “Hey,” I say a little too breathless

“Ryder? How did the meeting go with Mr. Townsen?” my father asks all business.

“Great.” I wave it off. “What are you doing you here?” I ask never taking my eyes off her.

“I came to see your father. But I’m leaving now.” She walks past me and out the door.

“See you tomorrow, Dad,” I say as I follow her. He calls my name, but I ignore him as I continue to follow the woman who gets better and better every time I see her.

Her heels clap on the floor, her hips sway back and forth, and her big curls bounce against her back. A purse hangs over her right shoulder and the slit up the back of her black skirt allows me to see a little more of her legs. My cock hardens as I imagine taking the thin fabric in my hands and ripping it off her.

I walk right past my office and follow her to the elevator doors. “Were you going to say hi to me?” I ask, coming up beside her. I take a quick look over my shoulder and see Kelly sitting behind her desk; she’s got her head down and is busy working.

“I wasn’t planning on it,” she replies, not bothering to turn and look at me.

I chuckle as if that was funny. “And why not?”

She lets out a huff as if the elevator is taking too long to arrive at our floor. She turns her face to look at me, and I place my hands in my pockets

to keep from reaching out, grabbing her face, and kissing her in front of everyone. “Because I had nothing to say,” she replies simply.

I open my mouth to speak, but the elevator dings and the doors slide open. I open my hand and say, “After you.”

She walks in, and I make my way past her. I lean my back against the far wall and let my eyes roam all over her once again. She is paying more attention to her phone than she is me as the doors close. We’re in it alone, and I can’t help but lean in and smell her. It brings back memories of the first elevator we were in at our hotel in Panama City. “Bring back memories?” I ask her.

“Memories of what?” she asks, not bothering to look away from her phone.

“Us in an elevator back in Panama City.”

“Not really,” she answers with a careless shrug. “That was hardly the first time I ever rode on an elevator, Ryder.” She says my name like the thought of it alone is annoying her.

I smile at her answer. She’s gonna try and play hard to get after that kiss we had last night? She can try all she wants, but I know the truth. She liked it. Loved it even. “Is this gonna be another test? Want me to remind you how much you liked it?” She ignores me, and I bite my lips. *Hard to get, it is then.*

I push away from the wall and grab her upper arm, shove her back into the wall, and pin her arms above her head. “What are you doing?” she snaps as she looks up at me. Her phone makes a thud sound as it hits the floor, along with her purse.

“Reminding you.”

“Ryder, what the—”

I slam my lips to hers and let go of her hands. I expect her to push me away; it was a long shot to begin with, but she doesn’t. Instead, she pulls her head back and looks up at me, breathing heavy. I don’t move. She doesn’t move. I stand looking down at her with heated eyes and my chest pounding. It’s her move. If she pushes me away, I’ll move. If she pulls me to her, I’ll take advantage of it.

“You have to stop doing this,” she breathes.

“You don’t mean that.”

She licks her lips. “I do.”

I lift my hands to her face. “Tell me to stop then,” I whisper. She draws in a long breath and lets it out slowly. “Tell me to stop, and I will never touch you again, sweetheart.” There’s no way in hell I’ll be able to do what I just said. I’m calling her bluff; hopefully, she’s unable to see that.

“I want …” She stops herself mid-sentence as her wide eyes search mine.

I run my thumbs across her cheeks as I cup her face in my hands. “I want you,” I say honestly. “And I know you want me.” I lower my lips down to hers, so close they almost touch. “I can see it in your eyes. It was there on the beach in Florida, and it’s still there now.” My eyes search hers. “That night, you told me you wanted me. Now, I’m telling you that I want you.”

“The rule—”

“We’ve already broken that rule,” I state, and she swallows. “Now, tell me to stop.” I lower my voice to a whisper and lick my lips. She stays silent as she stares up at me, and I take that as a sign I’m gonna get what I want.

Keeping my eyes open, I gently press my lips to hers. Her eyes close as she kisses me back. It’s a soft and delicate kiss, but she moans as she presses her body into mine. My eyes close, slidding a free hand around her waist while the other holds her head. I deepen the kiss.

My cock instantly hardens, and I press my hips into hers. She tilts her head and moans again into my mouth. My hands reach down and grab the hem of her skirt. I go to lift it, but the elevator comes to a quick stop and dings. She shoves me so hard that my back hits the far wall. Two men from thirty-one enter and give us both head nods. One calls me by name and starts up a conversation with me, but I don’t hear one word of it. All of my attention is on Ashlyn. She picks up her phone and purse off the floor quickly and stands against the wall. Her blond hair messy and her chest heaving. I can see her hands shake as she holds them down at her sides. Her head tilts back, and her eyes looking deeply into mine. They’re on fire, and I wish I could continue kissing her. I’ve been craving that taste of hers for

the last week. Ever since my first taste in Panama City. The sexiest thing about her is her eyes. They make me lose control of myself, and I like that.

I don't notice that we have stopped and the doors have opened until she walks right past me quickly and out the elevator doors. "Ashlyn?" I call as she storms through the front lobby. "Ashlyn. Wait!" I call out, but she continues out the front doors.

"Will you stop?" I shout as I see her trying to hail a cab, standing on the curb. "What are you doing?"

"Getting a cab," she snaps.

Now, she's mad at me? "Here. I can give you a ride home."

"No, thanks." She waves her hands in the air as she jumps up and down in her heels.

I roll my eyes at her. So stubborn. "Ashlyn. This is ridiculous. Why are you so mad at me?"

"Why am I mad at you?" She spins around. Her eyes are wild, and her hair looks even blonder out in the sunlight. I love the way it makes her blue eyes stand out. She opens her mouth as if she wants to speak but closes it. She sighs heavily. "I've had one of those days that has my head spinning. I don't have the strength to deal with you right now, Ryder."

She turns back around, giving me her back. I reach out and touch her shoulder. "Hey, what did I do?"

"What you did in there was uncalled for," she snaps.

"What? Kissing you?"

"Yes."

"You kissed me back." I can't help but smirk as I say it. "You didn't tell me to stop."

"I know," she says as if she's mad at herself for not doing so.

"You didn't mind it in Florida."

She turns to face me. "Florida was supposed to be one night."

"But it was more than that, wasn't it?" I ask, and her eyes narrow on me. "It's okay to admit that I was a sex God," I remind her.

She throws her head back, laughing hysterically, and I like the way it sounds. A little crazy mixed with beautiful. She's like the hurricane that

you’re warned is coming; every fiber in you tells you to leave, but you end up staying just to see if you can survive it. “God, give a man a bone, and he’ll dig it up every chance he gets.”

I’m not sure what that means, so I don’t respond to it. “What about those pictures you sent me?”

Her hands drop to her sides, and she pops her right hip out. “Just what did you expect, Ryder? Did you think I would come to New York and be your little sex toy?”

“Well, yeah,” I say honestly.

She bares her white and perfectly straight teeth as she growls at me. “Unbelievable.” She turns back around and starts waving for a cab again.

I roll my eyes and look over to see Milton leaning up against the Escalade with a smile on his face as he watches on. People walk by, ignoring our banter. “Will you please just get in my car?” I ask her.

She ignores me a few more seconds as she tries to get a cab to notice her. Finally, one comes to a stop, tires squealing, and she jumps back as the damn thing almost pulls up onto the sidewalk. She kicks the back door and shouts, “Learn how to drive before you kill someone.” Then she turns and shoots me a *go to hell* look. I smile, knowing I just won this small war. Milton gives her a smile as she storms away from the cab, and he opens the back door for her.

“I swear I’m gonna end up as roadkill with how these taxis drive around here,” she mumbles as she pushes her skirt down, readjusting herself on the leather seat. As if that thin piece of black fabric will keep me from getting what I want. *She’s cute.* I still plan on ripping it off her.

“You’ll get used to it,” I tell her, climbing in beside her.

She snorts. “You’re the third person to say that to me in the last hour, and I still don’t believe it.”

ASHLYN

Why didn’t I tell him no? It’s one simple word.

NO! NO! NO!

Yet I said nothing. I kissed him back. I was going to allow him to pull up my skirt. If the elevator hadn't stopped, we would have what …? Had sex right there? In an elevator? Now, normally, I'm down for some public sex but at his work? For fuck's sake, his father works there.

I take a deep, calming breath, and it's a mistake. It doesn't calm me at all. It just makes me very aware of his cologne; clean linen and citrus. My pussy starts to throb. And if I can smell him that easily, then it means he's already on my clothes. Why does that make me smile?

This is a very bad idea. Him. Me. I don't want a relationship and neither does he, but still, he's my best friend's brother. And I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about being his sex toy more than once. But he doesn't need to know that. He would take that little bit of information and run with it.

If I was honest with myself at this very moment, sex is the one thing I would like right now. The way he kissed me in the elevator was just like the way he did in Panama City. Dominating. It felt good to have someone touch me like that. To know that with him, my body will physically let go and relax. But I can't do that with him.

Can I? I laugh at myself. That's crazy talk. *Go after a man.* That's exactly what I did when I met him on the beach. He was right; I threw myself at him like a bitch in heat. But that's what I was. All it took was one look, and I was salivating at the mouth. Now, he's even hotter.

I lower my head, letting my hair cover the side of my face to shield my eyes as I peek over at him. As if he knows I'm watching, he removes his black suit jacket and drapes it over the seat in front of us. Then he starts unbuttoning the cuffs on his crisp white button up before rolling them up to his elbows.

I cross my legs as I shift in my seat. I need a drink. I need something to take the edge off. *I need his cock inside me.*

I straighten my back and close my eyes and take a deep, calming breath. "I'm sorry," I state as I open my eyes and look over at him.

He stops rolling up his left sleeve and looks over at me. "For what?" he asks as his dark green eyes look down at me. I hate the way they look at me.

Like he can see right through me. Like he knows it won't take much to win the battle.

"For being a bitch," I admit. Swallow your pride, Ash. You're a better person than that.

He gives me a smile. One of those half smiles that if I were wearing panties, they would be wet right now. Now, I'm cursing myself for not wearing any. He reaches up and places his hand on my face. It's like he can't keep from touching me. I like the thought of that. "I like that about you."

"Well, I hate to break it to you, but every woman has that quality." I try and lighten the tension as I squirm in my seat.

He chuckles. "Not like you."

"I'm flattered," I say a little too breathlessly.

"Good." He lowers his face down to mine and stops just inches before our lips can touch. "You should be," he whispers, sending goose bumps down my body.

I lick my lips, and he watches my tongue with desire but makes no move to kiss me. "Is this you making me pay?" I can't help but ask.

"No," he says, but I can hear the satisfaction in his voice.

"Because I won't beg." That's a pointless statement. He knows I will.

He laughs as if that's the funniest thing I've ever said. "I don't want you to. I want you to answer a question."

My brows pull together. "A question?" He nods. "What is it?" I ask reluctantly.

"Thongs or boyshorts?"

I smile at his question. "Don't you wanna know?" I decide to play with him just like he's playing with me.

He groans as if in pain. "I do," he says. "Because I'm pretty sure you're wearing neither." I suck in a ragged breath. "I want you so bad right now," he admits with no shame.

I swallow. "I thought we said it was only gonna be one night?" I ask, trying not to press my lips to his. *Be strong*. My thighs clench, reminding me just how strong his hands were on my body. How he kissed me so hard,

I thought my lips would bruise. Then his body on top of mine … My pussy throbs as my breath comes faster and faster.

“We already broke that rule,” he reminds me once again. “So quit bringing it up.”

My skin breaks out in goose bumps as his hand moves from my cheek into my hair. He arches my neck back, and I find myself staring up at the black carpeted ceiling of the Escalade SUV. I close my eyes and bite my bottom lip to keep from moaning as his lips touch my neck. He places soft kisses up to my ear lobe where he pulls it into his lips and gently bites it.

“Ryder.” I can’t hold back the moan any longer. I fist my hands down by my sides to keep from touching him. I may rip his clothes off if I make contact.

“I’ve been waiting a week to hear you say my name like that again,” he muses as he presses my back into the seat. “What have you been waiting for, sweetheart?”

The way he calls me sweetheart makes me feel like a fly in his trap. It’s as if he knows he has me right where he wants me. And I hate to admit that he does. “You. Touching. Me.” I can’t even form a sentence.

I jump when his free hand grazes my knee. Soft at first as it makes its way under my skirt. I pull my legs as far apart as my tight skirt will allow, which isn’t much, but he doesn’t need the room anyway. His fingers crawl their way up my leg. With every inch, he grips my skin tighter. “Touching you where?” he asks. His lips trail back down my neck, and I’m panting with need.

“Everywhere,” I breathe as I rock my hips back and forth in the leather seat, needing the friction.

His hand makes it to my pussy, and he smiles against my skin. “You’re already wet, baby,” he growls. “Just like I knew you would be.” I whimper. “I wanna kiss your lips.”

“Then kiss me.” I lower my head so my lips are in his reach.

He smiles against them. “Your other lips, sweetheart.”

I groan, wishing we were alone and not in the backseat of his Escalade while Milton drives us home.

“When we get home, you’re coming up to my apartment. For the night.” It’s not a question, but I answer.

“Yes,” I breathe.

“I want you screaming that word all night long.”

I am so fucked!

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

RYDER

She’s so wet. I can feel the heat between her thighs. My finger slowly teases her as I run them up and down her pussy. I could push them into her wet pussy right here, but I wanna make her squirm. Make her beg. I don’t know what made her change her mind about crawling back in bed with me, but I’m not gonna fuck it up. I’m prepared to show her everything I got and more.

“Ryder—” The car coming to a stop interrupts whatever she was about to say.

“Hold that thought, darling,” I tell her as I softly kiss her lips. As I pull away, she leans in wanting more, but I don’t give it to her.

I open the door and grab her hand to help her out. “Thanks, Milton. I’ll see you in the morning,” I say in a rush.

“Yes, sir,” I hear him call out as I’m dragging her up the stairs of our apartment building. We make our way through the lobby with one of her hands in mine while my other is on the small of her back, guiding her to the elevator. We have to share it with another older couple who I know well. I make small talk with the husband, Jerry, but I only pretend to look at him. Instead, I look past him into the mirror as I watch Ashlyn stand beside me. Her eyes are heavy and her lips parted. She’s breathing heavy. She’s ready for me, and I couldn’t be more ready for her.

They stay on the elevator, heading for the pool that is located on the roof, so we don’t get the chance to be alone. I say goodbye and wish them a good night as we exit. Entering my apartment, I spin around, already unbuttoning my shirt, when she grabs me and pulls me toward her. “Now finish what you started,” she demands, letting go of me as she undoes her thin black belt. She then shoves the skirt down her legs and steps out of it.

My chest rumbles from a deep groan when I see her shaved pussy. She doesn't even bother to unbutton her shirt; she just lifts it up and over her head. The sight of her tan lace bra produces a growl deep inside my chest. It's nothing fancy, but the way it looks on her makes my mouth water. "Remove it," I order. She does without hesitation.

I stand motionless and speechless as my eyes rake over her naked body. All she has on are her black high heels, and my dick presses against my zipper, reminding me that my dreams don't even compare to what she looks like in person. Her perky tits bounce as she breathes deeply. Her pink nipples hard and her pussy so wet, I can see it from where I stand. "What was it that I started?" I ask, arching a brow. I want her to tell me. I wanna hear her say it.

She takes a step toward me and grabs my hand. Without a word, she places it between her legs. "This," she hisses.

She's wetter than she was in the car. I remove my fingers, and she whimpers. "Don't worry, sweetheart. I'm still gonna kiss your lips," I tell her before I lift her up and place her on the dining room table. It's the closest thing to us. I spread her legs and fall to my knees on the floor. Throwing her legs over my shoulders, I bury my face in her pussy.

She arches her back and moans as I taste her. "Oh … God …" she cries out as I fuck her pussy with my tongue. I moan against her sex, and she whimpers, bucking her hips. I grip her hips so tightly, she'll have bruises afterward, but I don't care. She doesn't care. Her cries and her gasps fuel me to continue. To eat her until she comes. I wanna taste her just as badly as she wants to let go. We've both been starving.

Her hands dig in my hair, and she yanks on it. I release her hips and grab her wrists. I pin them down to the table by her hips. Her pussy gets wetter.

I slowly pull away. "You like that, sweetheart?" I ask, slowly running my tongue over her lips. She shudders, and I grip her wrists tighter. "You like when I hold you down and take it?" I turn my head and bite into her sensitive thigh. She gasps, her hips bucking wildly.

"Yes," she says breathlessly. "Take it. Please," she begs, and I smile before biting her the inside of her other thigh.

I gently kiss her skin, making my way back to her wet lips. She gasps as I suck her clit into my mouth. She fists her hands, and she arches her back, but I keep her in place. “I want you to come on my tongue, baby.” She moans as I bury my head back in her pussy and give her exactly what she wants.

ASHLYN

I wander aimlessly around Ryder’s apartment with a blanket wrapped around my naked body that I removed from the couch while he went to take a phone call. I wanted his cock after he fucked me with his tongue, but his phone rang, and he apologized, saying he had to take it.

So here I am being nosy. His is so different from my and Becca’s apartment. Ours is all white and full of pops of color here and there. His is much darker. Manlier. And I like it. The kitchen is nothing but stainless appliances and black countertops with a dark gray backsplash.

The living room has two black leather couches and one dark red loveseat. The floors are a beautiful black wood, and I try to stay off them by stepping only on the dark rugs while still wearing my heels.

I turn away from the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room and see a winding staircase over in the far corner. *Is his a two story?*

I hear him talking on his phone down a hallway, so I decide to go up the stairs. Pulling the blanket up, so I don’t trip over it, I make my way up the winding stairs.

As I come to the top, my eyes widen. Ten bookshelves, five shelves tall, line the far wall. A desk sits in the middle of the room with a computer and printer on it. There’s a family picture of him, Becca, and his mom and dad on the far wall from the day of Becca’s high school graduation. She is wearing her cap and gown. Ryder has his arm over her shoulders with a proud smile on his face. I smile as I start to look over the books that occupy the shelves.

I run my hands over the spines as I take in the smell of the books. I’ve always loved to read. Ever since I could remember, my mother would

always say that I preferred fiction over reality. I read the titles as I look them over. *Steve Jobs* by Walter Isaacson, *To Kill A Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, and a few that look to have to do with stock trading and investments. A couple of self-help books. One bookcase is full of books that look to be from his college classes.

“Find anything you like?”

I jump up and spin around when I hear Ryder’s voice. “I’m so sorry …” I say as I see him now standing at the top of the stairs in his office, his arms crossed over his chest while he leans up against the doorjamb. Still fully dressed. I run a hand through my hair nervously. “I …”

He waves off my concern and smiles softly. Pushing off the door, he walks in. “I was serious. See anything you like?”

I give him a shy smile, still embarrassed he caught me in here. I take a deep, calming breath, trying to slow my racing heart. “You don’t have many romance novels,” I say, trying to lighten the mood.

He arches an eyebrow. “Romance, huh? I wouldn’t peg you to be that type of woman.” He steps up to me and runs his knuckles down the side of my cheek.

“What does that mean?” I ask, leaning into him.

He pulls his hand away and shrugs. “You just don’t seem like the kind of girl who believes in fairy tales.”

I snort. “Fairy tales and romance are two very different things,” I state.

“How so?”

“Fairy tales are for children,” I say with an eye roll.

“And romance?” he questions.

“Romance is associated with love,” I say with a careless shrug.

He stands there, studying my face for a few seconds before he speaks again. “And what book is your favorite romance?”

I smile. “*Romeo and Juliet*.”

He frowns. His dark green eyes looking into mine with confusion. “Most would call that a tragedy.”

“Most would be wrong,” I argue.

“They die.”

“Yes, I know,” I say flatly.

He runs his hand through his spiked hair. “How is that romantic?”

“Have you ever loved someone so much that you couldn’t see a life without that person? That you would rather die than live without them?” I ask.

His brows pull together, but he shakes his head softly. “No.”

“Neither have I.”

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

RYDER

“I’m confused,” I admit, trying to figure out how we went from her screaming my name as she came to us standing in my office discussing love.

“That’s the kind of love I want,” she declares with a smile. “When I decide to look for it. I want that soul-crushing, all-consuming love.”

“Sounds like it will make you crazy.”

“Love is crazy,” she says seriously. “You don’t know who you really are unless you lose yourself. And love makes you lose yourself. True love is messy. And it will drive you crazy.”

I reach out and grab the blanket from her hands. I open it up to expose her very naked body to me. She’s still only wearing her black heels. “You’re driving me crazy,” I say truthfully.

She laughs. “What are you gonna do about it?” she asks.

“I have several ideas,” I say as a matter-of-fact. I drop the blanket to the floor and say, “Lay down.”

An hour later, we are lying in my bed. She sighs as she rolls over and I wrap my arm around her, and her phone starts to ring. Letting go of her, she crawls off the bed and picks her phone up off the nightstand. She looks down at it and then places her finger to her lips to signal me to be quiet. I frown but do as she says.

“Hello?” she asks and then takes a deep, calming breath. “Hello, sir.” My eyes widen. Who could she be talking to? She closes her eyes and smiles widely. “Yes, sir. That is perfect.” There’s a pause. “Thank you, sir.” She hangs up and starts jumping up and down.

“What was that about?” I ask, sitting up.

She tosses her phone on the floor. “I got the job at the gallery.”

She got the job? “What?”

She jumps up and down before hopping on the bed. She straddles me and smiles down as her blond hair falls over her left shoulder and lands on my chest while she leans over me. “I got the job at the gallery.”

“That’s great,” I tell her, but she already knows that.

“God, I’m so excited,” she says, shaking my body, and I laugh. She looks down at me and gets a serious look on her face. “I’ve always wanted to run my own gallery.”

“Really?” I ask, reaching up and pushing her hair behind her ear.

She nods. “I’ve always dreamed of being surrounded by art. I want to give all artists a chance to show the world what they can do. ”

“What about the rest of your dreams?”

She tilts her head to the side. “What do you mean the rest?”

“You know a family. Kids.”

Her smile brightens. “I believe a woman can have a career and a family, Ryder.”

“I agree with you, but do you want that?”

She nods. “Of course. Someday, I want to find that guy who shares the desire for a family. But I’m in no rush at the moment.”

“Have you been hurt before?” I ask, pushing her.

“Is this twenty questions?” she asks, her eyes narrowing just the slightest.

“No.” I shake my head. “I just wanna get to know more about you.”

“More?” She laughs, her eyes softening again. “You make it sound like you already know stuff about me.”

“Well, I do.”

“Like what?” she asks, arching a brow to challenge me.

I smile up at her as I look into those bright blue eyes. “I know that no matter how tough you try to be, you’re a softie. I know that you treat your best friends like family. And I know that when my sister had no one, you stepped up and were her everything.”

She gives me a soft smile. “She needed me, and I was there. It was a simple decision.”

“Now, back to men,” I say, and she rolls her eyes. “What’s the story about the guy who dumped you in a newsletter?”

“Did Becca tell you about that?” she asks, chuckling.

I shake my head. “No, you brought it up when she was upset over Conner in Panama City. If I remember correctly, you said she spent three days sitting on the couch drinking wine and eating ice cream when he dumped you in a newsletter.”

She nods, making her hair fall out from behind her ear. “That’s pretty much how it went.”

“But you also told me while we were in Florida that you’d never had your heart broken.”

“Broken? No. Been pissed off? Yes.” She lets out a long breath. “I just can’t stand men like Conner. I’m all for getting laid and having fun—obviously—but you can still hook up with a woman and respect her.”

I nod my head in agreement. “I agree.”

“Our sophomore year, I had taken this journalism class.” My brows rise. “I know, not even remotely related to art, but I wanted to take it. I started dating a guy in the class. We weren’t even a couple. Just a few dates here and there, and of course, we were sleeping together. Well, for our final grade, we had to construct a newsletter. The bastard had one of his smart friends hack into the school newsletter and sent his to the entire school, where the fucker dumped me in it.”

I can’t help but laugh. “You’re joking.”

She slaps me on my bare chest. “No joke. I couldn’t care less that he dumped me. I mean, it made him look stupid since we weren’t even a couple, but it was what he said that pissed me off. He called me a clingy, manipulating bitch and that I would only fuck with my clothes on because I was insecure about my body.”

“What an ass,” I say, but I’m still laughing.

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure you can go online and hashtag clingy Ashlyn, and a ton of tweets will pop up.” She shrugs carelessly. “But anyway, I got him back.”

“Oh God, what did you do?”

She smiles an evil smile. “He had a phobia of clowns. So one night, I bought a big orange wig, a clown outfit, and I painted my face like a clown. I knew his late class was on a Tuesday, so I climbed a tree and waited for his class to get out. I jumped out of the tree right in front of him and scared the shit out of him.” She laughs. “He actually peed his pants, and your sister was off to the side recording it.”

I laugh out loud. “Becca never told me about that.”

“She was my sidekick in several revenge plots. Well, I did all the heavy lifting, and she just held the camera. Anyway, after that, I broke into his apartment and put the costume along with the wig in his closet so when he opened his closet door, he would pee himself again.”

“Did you get that on camera?” I ask, smiling.

She frowns. “No. But I’m hopeful that it happened.”

I laugh as I lift my hands to her face. “You are such a bad girl.”

“I’m not bad. I just believe in karma.”

ASHLYN

I wake to the sound of a shower running. I sit up and push blond hair from my face as I look around at the room I slept in last night. Ryder’s bedroom. His walls are painted a soft gray like the rest of the apartment. His bed sits up on a platform in the center of his room with the headboard back against the wall. A massive TV hangs on the wall across from the bed.

I get out of bed and make my way to the bathroom. I lean up against the countertop as I watch him wash his muscular body in the shower. “Morning,” I say.

He opens the door immediately. Soap covers his body and his hair is wet, hanging in his eyes. He pushes it back, and it stands straight up like I like it. He smiles. “Good morning, Sunshine.”

I hate how he has these pet names for me. They make me feel all warm inside. He steps to the side of the door and jerks his head. “Won’t you join me?”

“Don’t mind if I do,” I say as I push off the countertop and step inside.

He shuts the door and pulls me under the sprayer. I squeal as to how cold it is. “It’s freezing,” I whine.

“Oh no, it’s not. It’s perfect.” He hugs me tightly.

I’m shivering. “Are you crazy?” My teeth start to chatter.

“I take cold showers in the morning to help me wake up,” he admits.

“That’s what coffee is for,” I say, pressing myself into his hard chest. Even that isn’t gonna warm me up.

He chuckles. “Okay. Okay.” He pulls away from me and turns it warmer.

I place my body under it as I feel it start to heat up. “Much better,” I say with a sigh as it heats up my body.

He laughs and moves behind me. He wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me to his chest. “I can think of another way to heat you up,” he offers.

I turn in his arms and look up at him. “Thought you weren’t awake yet?”

He smiles. “I’m suddenly wide awake.”

“Well, I’m still cold,” I lie.

***

I’m standing in his bedroom, dressing in my clothes from yesterday when he comes walking out of his closet dressed in another fabulous suit that makes my knees weak. “What are your plans for tonight?” he asks as he does his tie.

“Why?” I ask slowly, wondering where this is going.

“I thought we could go to dinner—”

“No,” I interrupt him before he can finish.

He drops his tie and comes to stand in front of me. “What’s wrong with dinner?”

I reach up and continue with his tie where he left off. “I’m okay with this,” I admit. It can’t go any farther than this.

“This being?”

“Sex,” I answer. “But nothing else.” I look him in the eyes as I say it.

“And dinner implies something else?” he asks arching a dark eyebrow.

I nod. “It implies dating.”

“You make that sound like such a bad thing.”

I freeze with his tie and look up at him. “It is,” I say flatly. “I’m all for sex, Ryder, but that’s as far as this is gonna go.”

“Is this another rule?” he asks jokingly.

“Yes,” I answer without hesitation.

Something tenses in his jaw, but then he asks, “What about being friends?”

I bite the inside of my cheek as I think about that. *Are we friends?* I would say that can be a possibility. “Sure.”

He smiles in satisfaction as if he just won an argument. “Friends eat dinner together.”

“Not when they are screwing.”

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

RYDER

I hate to admit that the fact she turned me down for dinner stings. I thought we were getting past this bullshit. “What about Bradley?” She stands just staring at me. “Did you guys not eat dinner together?” I wanna ask her if they had sex while she was home for the week, but that may be pushing it. The thought of him touching her has my blood boiling. *Mine!*

“Bradley and I are different,” she finally responds flatly.

My jaw tightens. I don’t like the way she says *are* and not were. “How so?”

“We don’t have to have rules. We just know where we both stand.”

“And where do we stand?” I ask, pushing the subject.

She places her hands on her hips. “Why are you making this a thing, Ryder?”

“Because I wanna make sure we’re on the same page.” I throw her words back in her face from the first night we slept together.

“And what is that?” she demands.

“That you’re not out screwing other men.” I come out and say it.

Her brows rise to her hairline. “Excuse me?” she snaps. “You can’t tell me what to do.”

“If we are going to do this, then I’m gonna make some rules of my own. And one rule is that you do not sleep with other men.”

Her mouth falls open as she lets out a puff of air. “Unbelievable,” she whispers.

I step up to her. “What? Is that gonna be hard for you?” I challenge.

Her eyes narrow on me. “Contrary to what you may believe, I’m not a whore.”

“I never said that,” I say, shaking my head. “But if you were able to sleep with only Bradley, then you can sleep with only me.”

“What?” she asks slowly and then shakes her head. “Bradley and I were never exclusive,” she says matter-of-factly. “We were friends who slept together. How is that hard for you to understand?”

I frown. “So what you’re telling me is that you slept with him and he slept with you, but you both slept with other people?”

“Yes,” she snaps.

“God, he’s an idiot,” I whisper.

“What?” she demands.

I step up to her and place my hand on her soft face. I tilt her head back and look down into her blue eyes. “He’s an idiot.” Her eyes search mine as she frowns. “Anyone who is willing to share you is stupid.” I lean down, placing my lips on hers. “Now, is that a rule you can follow or not?” I question.

“I don’t just jump every guy that I see,” she states.

“It’s a yes or no, Ashlyn,” I growl.

“Yes,” she snaps, “I can follow it.”

I place my hands on her face and press my lips to hers. I kiss her deeply, and we’re both breathing heavy when I pull away. I run a hand through her hair. *You’re losing your mind, Ryder.* “New rule,” I decide to say. Rules are what she seems to understand. “No fighting.” It’s a stupid rule, but it’s all I can think of at the moment.

She lets out a long breath, and after a few long seconds, she finally nods. “You can’t just kiss me every time we get into it. That’s not fair.”

I smile but nod. “What are you doing this Friday night?”

“Why?” she asks slowly. “Is your list so long that you need to schedule your time with me?”

“List?”

“Of women,” she clarifies.

I chuckle. “You don’t sleep with anyone else. I don’t sleep with anyone else,” I say.

“So does that mean no threesomes?” she asks, her face never changing. *Is she joking?*

My dick instantly hardens. “You wanna have a threesome?” I ask, swallowing hard. She shrugs as if she couldn’t care less, and it makes me weak in the knees. “With a man or a woman?” I can’t help but ask.

“I’m down for whatever.”

I imagine her lying on my bed, her hands on a woman’s body as they kiss. Me standing back, watching as they play with one another, and my cock strains behind my zipper. Then I think of her on top of me, fucking me while another man stands behind her. My jaw tightens. *I refuse to share.* “No. Not even threesomes. Just you and me.”

She smiles as if she’s satisfied with that answer, and I feel like I just passed some secret test. “So back to Friday.”

“What about it?” she asks, letting out a puff of air.

“It’s my birthday party.”

“Oh,” she says truly surprised.

“I want you to come. It’s not a date. Just friends.” My birthday was over a week ago, but this is the first chance I have to do anything for it.

“Absolutely.”

I place my hands on her face and lean in to kiss her lips, gently this time. Just our lips touching. “Now, I get to ask a question.”

“What is it with you and these questions?”

This is my way to get to know her better. “Red wine or white wine?”

“White,” she answers without hesitation.

“White it is, then.”

“What …?”

I press my lips to hers and part my lips, letting her know I wanna take it further. She doesn’t disappoint as she opens up for me.

Have you ever kissed someone and just feel ... something that you’ve never felt before? The only way I can explain it is like a shock to my insides. Like she’s set me on fire with just one match.

I pull away and whisper against her lips. “I wanna take you back to bed,” I admit.

“You’ll be late.”

“It’ll be worth it.” At this point, I may just call in sick.

ASHLYN

I left Ryder’s apartment and went down to ours as he left for work. An hour late. He told me he wanted to stay in bed with me all day, but his phone kept blowing up. I knew it wasn’t an option, even if I wanted it to be.

I went straight to my room and fell face first onto my bed, letting out a long breath. This is a horrible mistake. I keep telling myself that, but for some reason, I don’t stop it. My tight muscles remind me why I haven’t stopped.

He’s like an addiction, and like most addictions, he may be my downfall. I roll over onto my back when I hear my phone ring. It’s Bradley, and I answer with a smile.

“Hey, princess,” he says in greeting. “How are things going in the Big Apple?”

“Great so far,” I say with a laugh. “I got the job.”

“See. I told you not to worry,” he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. “I knew you would rock that interview. We will celebrate when I come visit this weekend.”

I smile at the thought of getting to see him. “I miss you,” I say with a frown. I wasn’t lying when I told Ryder that Bradley and I are different because we are.

“I miss you too, princess, and so does Harry. I went over to your mother’s yesterday, and he sat at the front door as if he was waiting for you to come in after me. Although he looked funny with the cone around his head.”

“I miss my little man too.”

“Well, we will both be there this Saturday.” Harry had to stay behind because he had an appointment to be neutered. Bradley was with me when I called the vet and made the appointment over a month ago. He said he

would bring him with him when he came to visit. It was my only option for Harry.

“What time do you come in again? I’ll pick you up at the airport.”

“You don’t have a car,” he reminds me.

I snort. “I can take a cab.”

“No, don’t do that. Harry and I will catch a cab and meet you at the apartment. I know what New York traffic is like, and I know you have no patience.”

I laugh. Bradley had lived here when he was younger. He moved to Seattle when he lost both his parents and had to move in with his grandparents in Seattle. “You could have warned me about the cabs. I swear they wanna kill me.”

“You get used to it.”

“Everyone keeps saying that, but I’m not sure I’ll ever get used to my life being in danger.”

He laughs some more. “Well, I won’t keep you, princess. I just wanted to see how it was going. Congratulations on your new job and I will see you this weekend. Love you.”

I smile. “Love you too.” I hang up and hear our doorbell ring. I hear voices and then Becca’s laugh. I get out of bed and make my way into the living room and to the kitchen. Becca is setting two large bouquets of what looks like fresh fruits on the counter.

“What is that?” I ask.

She points at the one closest to me on the counter. “That one’s for you.”

“What?” She doesn’t respond as she reads a card, so I go over to it and open it up.

This is your New York welcome package.
Ryder.

There’s a gift certificate in it for a place called Rosie’s. No price listed. “Becca? What is this?” I ask, throwing it down onto the countertop. I pluck

one of the fruits off the stick and stick a pineapple in my mouth. Mmmmm. So good.

"Ryder got us spa days at Rosie's," she declares with a big smile on her face. "God, I haven't been there in forever."

I sigh. *Gifts?* I hate gifts. "I see that. What is Rosie's?"

"It's a spa. A very upscale salon and spa. Jaycent's sister owns it." She's overly excited, and I get a sick feeling about it.

"Is this place expensive?" I ask stupidly. Of course, it is. She bites her bottom lip as she looks away from me. "Dammit, Ryder."

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

RYDER

I’m sitting at my desk going over some emails when my phone goes off. I lean back in my seat and smile when I see it’s Ashlyn. “Hello, sweetheart. Miss me already?”

“Why did you send me a gift?” she demands in greeting.

My smile widens. “Most women would just say thank you.”

“I’m not like most women,” she barks.

I know! “You’re welcome.” She huffs. “How about you thank me properly tonight?” I offer.

“Ryder,” she growls. “I’m serious. This is not a joke.”

“Good because I’m not joking,” I tell her.

“No.”

“Why are you making things so difficult?” I ask.

“Why are you trying to break every rule we have?” she counters.

I snort. “There were no rules about how many days a week I could see you.” I can hear her growl, and I refrain from laughing. “Now, let me take you out tonight.”

“No. I said no dates.”

“It’s not a date,” I promise her. “Me, you, Becca, and Jaycent can go out. Show you the nightlife of New York. It’ll be fun,” I add.

“I don’t know,” she mumbles as if her mouth is full.

“Are you enjoying the fruit bouquet?” I ask with laughter.

“Yes,” she admits with a sigh as if that was hard for her.

I laugh harder. “Good. But about tonight. You might as well just say yes. Because if you don’t, then I’ll message Becca about going out, and she will bug you until you break.”

“Fine!” she says reluctantly, and I fist pump the empty air.

“Okay. I’ll come down to get you girls around eight.” Before she can change her mind, I hang up.

I hear a knock on the door and holler, “Come in.”

My father walks in with a file in his hand. “I have the Anderson file,” he says, tossing it onto my desk.

I nod. “I’ll look over it later,” I say, ignoring the file that I am now regretting. It’s a grenade that can go off at any moment.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asks.

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying,” he states. “You were late this morning.” I don’t respond to that statement. He sits down in the chair across from my desk. I sigh, wishing he would just leave. “Spill.”

“Nothing is wrong, and I’m not in the mood to have the talk,” I say flatly.

“The talk?” he asks arching a brow.

“Yeah, the talk where you tell me not to fuck this Anderson deal up.” I hate that it ever got thrown my way.

He tilts his head to the side as if confused by my attitude, but he does as I say by standing and then walking out the door. I look down at the file and sigh. This is gonna fuck me over in the worst way.

***

It’s eight o’clock on the dot when I knock on their apartment door. My sister answers the door with a smile on her face, and I frown at what she is wearing. “That’s what you’re wearing out?” Somehow, over the last four years, my sister has become a woman. I don’t like it!

She frowns. “What’s wrong with it?” she asks, looking down at the blue dress that barely reaches her thighs and hangs low in the front to show off her cleavage. I may have to burn my eyes.

“There’s not enough to it,” I say, and she hits me in the arm.

She laughs and rolls her eyes. “Get inside.”

I look down at my watch. “Are you ladies ready?” I ask, looking around the apartment.

“I am. Ashlyn is still getting ready.”

I start to walk off to her room as I hear the doorbell ring. I ignore it and let Becca get it, knowing that it’s Jaycent. I turn the corner and walk down the hallway. I walk into her bedroom after seeing her door is open.

“Ashlyn?” I call out when I don’t see her.

“One second,” she calls back from the bathroom behind the shut door.

I sit down at the end of her bed as I fix my white tie. I’m debating on taking the thing off when the bathroom door opens. I look over just as she exits. “I didn’t know how to dress. Is this okay?” she asks turning towards me.

I look over her body as if in awe. She wears a black lace halter dress. It looks sexy yet covers her body at the same time. “You look … amazing,”

“Really?” She turns and looks at herself in the floor-length mirror. “I feel it’s too …”

“No!” I say standing. I walk up behind her and pull her blond hair off her shoulder as I lean down and place my lips on her neck. I gently kiss it, and the smell of vanilla almost knocks me off my feet. “It’s perfect,” I whisper.

She turns around in my arms and looks up at me. “You have to stop doing that,” she whispers.

“Why?” I ask, reaching up and cupping her face. “Am I affecting you the same way you’re affecting me?” I ask.

She swallows as those blue eyes search mine. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’re a horrible liar,” I say with a smile.

Just then a knock comes at the door. “Let’s go, guys,” I hear Jaycent call out.

“Coming,” I say loudly, making her jump. I give her one last smile, grabbing her hand and pull her out of the room.

We pile into the back of my Cadillac, and Milton climbs into the driver’s seat. I instruct him on our destination, and he pulls into traffic. My sister and Jaycent talk among themselves, but I don’t hear a single word they say. My eyes are on Ashlyn as she sits beside me. She has her legs crossed over one another, and her hands rest on her lap as they hold her little purse.

My eyes start at her black heels and move up her thin, smooth legs to the hem of her dress. It stops on her upper thighs in the position she sits in. She has her long blond hair pulled over her right shoulder. She licks her plump red lips, and my cock hardens.

I readjust myself unabashed, and her eyes fall to my lap. She looks away quickly as her cheeks turn the same shade of her lips. I smile and pull my cell out of my pocket.

Me: *That's what you do to me.*

She digs into her purse and pulls out her phone. She bites her bottom lip before she starts to type.

Ashlyn: *Seems like a personal problem to me.*

I laugh.

Me: *Thankfully, you can fix it.*

Ashlyn: *You sound so sure of yourself.*

Me: *I'm very confident that, by the end of this night, you will be naked in my bed. Just like you were last night.*

She reads it and rolls her eyes as she places her phone back in her purse without answering. I just laugh.

Twenty minutes later, we pull up to the Mainor Hotel. We exit the car and make our way inside. "This is a hotel," she says as she looks at the people walking around and the bellhop carrying their luggage. People line up at the desk to check in.

"Yes," I agree.

She remains quiet as we make our way to the rooftop. The elevator is packed, and I hold her back tightly to my front. She wiggles her ass on

purpose, and my cock hardens. I lean down and whisper in her ear. “You’re gonna pay for that later.”

She laughs softly. “Promises. Promises.”

“If I keep one thing, it’s my promises.”

The doors open and people usher their way out onto the rooftop. We come to a line where a bouncer wearing a black tie, black button-down, and black dress slacks stands on the other side of a red rope with a clipboard.

“Come on,” I say, pulling on her hand and walking around the line.

“Ry, man,” he says as he looks up and sees me. “Jaycent. What brings you guys out this evening?” he asks.

I let go of her hand to give him a one-handed bro-hug. “Thought we would come out for the night,” I say as he does the same with Jaycent.

“It’s been a long time,” he says to Jaycent.

I reach back and grab Ashlyn’s hand again. “It has,” Jaycent says before he drapes his arm over Becca’s shoulder.

I open my mouth to ask him *what the hell* but close it when I see our old friend eyeing her up and down. He’s just trying to make her look taken, and I’m fine with that.

He lifts the red rope and gestures behind him. “Go ahead, guys. I’ll come and find you later.”

“Thanks, man,” I say.

“Wow,” Ashlyn says with her mouth hanging open when we step onto the black concrete. “This is a bar?” she asks in amazement.

“Yep,” I answer. “Do you like it?”

She looks over at the far right where six bushes line the glass rail. In front of the bushes is a water fountain. To the left is the bar with high-top tables set up along the glass rail. She looks up at me with a big smile on her face. “I love it.” She doesn’t let go of my hand as she makes her way through the crowd. We leave Jaycent and Becca as I allow her to pull me straight ahead to the glass railing.

I let go of her hand, and she places it on the rail. I step behind her and wrap my arms around her waist. “Every time I see this city from a different view, it gets better and better.”

“Funny. Because I feel the same way about you.”

I expect her to argue or to elbow me. Instead, she surprises me by leaning back against me and letting out a sigh. I rest my chin on top of her head and smile. *So the city is my way in.* That is going to be her weakness, and I can use that to my advantage. It’s perfect up here. It’s a little windy but not too bad. The air is cool for a June night, and the city lights up from all the buildings. You can see the Hudson River from here and the George Washington Bridge.

“We got you guys some drinks.” I look over to see Jaycent and Becca standing next to us.

“Thank you,” she says, pulling away from me and taking her drink from Becca.

Becca takes a sip from her straw with a smile on her face, and then it drops, and she slowly lowers her drink. “What’s wrong?” Ashlyn asks, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Becca says nothing as she continues to look past us. We all turn to see what she sees, and to my surprise it’s Conner. He’s sitting at a high-top table with a redhead. “Is he still messaging you?” Ashlyn demands. Becca nods. “When was the last time he messaged you?”

“Earlier today.”

“What did he say?” she demands.

“That he wanted to have dinner tonight. I ignored it like I have all the others.”

“He’s such a fucking player,” Ashlyn growls.

“Fuck,” Jaycent hisses. “I’ll take care of it.” He goes to walk off, but Ashlyn grabs his upper arm with a shake of her head.

“You had him last time. Now, it’s my turn,” she states.

“What do you mean last time?” Becca asks. We all act like we didn’t hear her.

Ashlyn turns to me. “Hold this,” she orders, handing me her drink. She looks around for a few seconds and then smiles when she sees a little crop jacket thrown on a couch up against the railing. She grabs it and wads it up. She turns her back to us as she bends over. I frown, trying to figure out

what she's doing. When she finally turns back around, I see a bump under her dress.

"What are you doing?" Jaycent asks her, but she waves a hand in the air as she walks off, and she yanks her drink out of my hand. "Oh, this is gonna be good," Jaycent says with a smile and then takes a drink of his beer.

She makes her way over to them and comes to a stop at their table. Placing her hand on her hip, she then throws her drink in his face. His date gasps as Conner stands, gasping for air. "What the fuck?" He looks over at her, and his eyes widen in recognition. "Ashlyn?" he growls.

"You know this woman?" his date demands.

"You son of a bitch," Ashlyn snaps. "You said you had a meeting that was running late." She looks down at the jacket under her dress. "And this is where I find you?" She takes his date's drink and tosses it in his face as well. "You took vows, Conner ..."

"You're married?" his date shouts as she stands.

Conner shakes his head at her. "No. Ashlyn is fucking crazy …"

"How can you say that? Little Conner can hear you," Ashlyn says, rubbing her belly.

"She's crazy," Conner tells his date once again.

His date slams her fists on the table and then turns around and storms off. Conner doesn't even give Ashlyn another look before he spins around and follows after her. Ashlyn comes back over to us with a satisfied smile on her face and winks as she removes the jacket out from underneath her dress.

"Fucker," she says.

Becca laughs as she pulls her in for a hug. "Thanks, girl. I needed that."

"That's what I'm here for," she says then wraps her arm around Becca. "Now, come on; I need a new drink." They take off.

"You have your hands full with that one," Jaycent says, lifting his drink to his lips.

"I know," I say with a smile as I turn to follow her. No way will I let her buy her drink.

***

Ashlyn goes to stumble out of the elevator as the doors open but I pull her back into my body. “I’ll see you in the morning,” she slurs as the doors close on Becca and Jaycent after they exit. If I wasn’t so concered about Ashlyn, I would be wondering why Jaycent just got off the elevatror with my sister.

She continues to laugh as the elevator comes to a stop on my floor. I hold on tightly to her left arm and open the door to my apartment with my right. Popping it open with my foot, I help her inside. She takes a couple of steps and comes to a stop in front of me. She reaches down grabbing my shirt and yanks up, pulling it out of my slacks. “Just what do you think you’re doing?”

“You,” she says simply.

I place my hands on her upper arms and move her away from the door so it can close. “Not even gonna play hard to get?” I ask with a chuckle.

She pulls herself free of my hold and sways back and forth. “Is that what you want me to do?” She licks her lips, and I have a feeling they’re numb by now. I lost count of how many drinks she had, but I know she had more than five shots.

I reach up and wrap my hands in her soft blond hair. I yank her head back, and she gasps as her glassy blue eyes widen. I lower my lips to hers and whisper against them. “Darling, you could do anything, and I’ll still fall to my knees before you.”

I lower my head and place soft kisses on the skin of her neck, and she starts to breathe heavily. “Why do you say things like that?” she asks breathlessly.

I pull back and look down at her. “Things like what?” I ask with my hands still wrapped in her hair.

She closes her eyes and then opens them. They search mine as she whispers, “Things that make me think there could be something more than sex between us.”

I smile. “Is that what you want?” Any other time, I am more than willing to fuck her senseless, but right now, I want her to tell me everything that she would never tell me sober.

“It’s a mistake,” she says licking her lips.

“What is, sweetheart?”

Her hands come up and slide under my shirt that she untucked. “Anything other than sex between us.”

“What if I want more?” I’m not sure why I said that. I can’t blame it on alcohol since I only had a few beers. I wanted this night to be about her. I do know that I want her to be mine and only mine. I can’t imagine having to share her with someone else. Another man having the opportunity to take her out and see her naked. Feel her soft skin. Fuck that tight pussy. A growl escapes me as I loosen my grip on her hair and then tighten it. *Mine!*

Her lips part, and she takes a deep breath as she shuffles from foot to foot. Her legs are tired of holding her up. “I can’t give you more,” she all but slurs.

“Can’t or won’t?”

Her hands are still under my shirt. She digs her nails down my stomach, and I grind my teeth together as my skin burns. “Why are we still talking?” she asks. “Fuck me!”

I let go of her hair and grab her hands. I spin her around so her back is against my front door. I pin her hands above her head and press my body into hers. I let her feel how hard I am as I push my hard cock into her lower belly, and she whimpers. “You want that, baby?” I ask, lowering my lips down to hers. I don’t kiss her but want her to think that I will.

She nods quickly. “Yes. Please,” she begs and leans forward. I pull back before she can kiss me and smile.

“Then answer the question,” I say, and she squirms, trying to get free. No such luck. “Why won’t you give me more?”

She stops squirming and looks up at me through long dark lashes. Her eyes narrow on me and her lips thin. She’s getting mad, and I like it. Mad will get me answers. “Because. When it ends, I’ll not only lose you, but I’ll also lose Becca.” She rushed the words, but I was able to make them out.

“Who said I was gonna let you go?”

She sucks in a long breath and presses her hips into mine again, knowing I’m ready for her. She’s hoping that I will give in. *Not a chance.* “Because

men like you don’t go for women like me.”

I let go of her hands, and they drop to her side like a brick falling off a building. I grab her face and frown. “What does that mean?”

She lifts her heavy arms and places her hands on my chest; she tries to shove me away, but she’s too drunk and weak, so I just take a step back from her. She steps away from the door and walks past me, her heels clapping against my hardwood floor. I turn to watch her as she places her arms out wide and spins around, letting out a laugh. “Look at this place, Ryder,” she says almost shouting. She stops spinning to face me and her arms drop to her side once again, and she sways. “You are the son of billionaire Timothy O’Kane. Like I said, men like you don’t go for women like me.”

“Money has nothing to do with this.” How can she think it does?

“It has everything to do with this,” she snaps.

“Do you like me for my money?” I ask, crossing my arms over my chest, still very aware of my hard dick in my slacks.

“No.” She shakes her head too fast and almost trips over her own feet. I reach out to stabilize her, but she knocks my hand away. “I like you because you make me feel something I have never felt before.” She licks her lips and slowly starts to walk toward me. I take the few steps and close the distance.

“What do I make you feel?” I ask, reaching out and caressing her soft cheek.

She closes her eyes and leans into it. Reaching up, she places her hand over mine. Her lips part and she whispers, “Like someone special.” She opens her eyes and looks up at me.

I smile. “You are special, Ashlyn.” Then I lean down and press my lips to hers.

ASHLYN

I don’t have time to process what just happened. My feet are numb, and my limbs are heavy. My mind is foggy, and my insides are tingling. Not sure if

it’s from his lips on mine or the alcohol, I kiss him back as passionately as I can. I wrap my heavy arms around his neck, and his hands go to my upper thighs. He lifts my dress up over my ass, and I moan into his mouth. *Yes! That’s what I want, Ryder. Fuck me!* But he doesn’t. Instead, he bends down. Wrapping his arms around my ass, he lifts me off the floor.

He kisses me as we make our way down the hallway, and then I’m falling; my heart stops, thinking I’m falling to my death.

I open my eyes and take a deeper breath when I see I’m lying on his bed looking up at the ceiling. I hear ripping of clothes and look up and see Ryder now shirtless and removing his slacks and shoes. Then his boxers are gone, and his hard cock stands at attention, and all I can think about is touching it, sucking it, riding it. “Ryder …” I pant as wetness pools between my legs. I shift up on my elbows and pull myself more onto the bed, causing it to pull my dress back down over the part that wants him the most.

He crawls on top of me, pushing me down, and brushes my hair away from my face. “You’re still dressed, baby.”

“Takeitoff,” I slur, reaching down and pulling on the hem of my dress. “Take. It. Off,” I say each word slower this time, in case he didn’t understand what I meant before. My pussy throbs. This gorgeous man is on top of me, and I’m not doing anything. I reach up and rub his smooth hard chest. The muscles in his arms flex as they hold him up, and I lift my heavy head to see his abs flex.

My head falls to the bed. “What are you waiting for?” I ask breathlessly.

He chuckles. “I like you like this.”

“Why?” I close my eyes and try to push him off so I can get undressed, but he’s straddling me, and I’m too drunk to move him.

“Squirming. Begging. I bet your pussy is soaking wet for my cock, isn’t it?” His voice is calm as if we are discussing the weather. My tongue is heavy and my lips numb.

I nod my head. “Yes.” Reaching down between us, I take his hard cock in my hand, and he hisses in a hard breath. The hard yet soft skin feels amazing as I wrap my fingers around his large and long cock and start to move up and down the length of him.

“Fuck, Ashlyn,” he growls. I pick up the pace, and then I feel his hands on my dress. “Lift your hips,” he demands, and I do, as he pushes my dress up my hips. “Fuck, yes,” he says when he sees I’m not wearing panties.

He leans over me and removes my hand from his cock. I reach up and grab his handsome face. “Fuck me. Please,” I beg, and his lips are on mine moments later.

His body falls on top of mine, and his tongue enters my mouth. I reach up and wrap my arms around his neck when I feel his dick enter my pussy without any warning or foreplay. I cry out into his mouth as he stretches me. His hands in my hair, his lips on mine, I lie there drunk on alcohol and lust as he once again takes me somewhere I’ve never been before. And a place I wanna never leave.

***

I wake up with a pounding headache and aching body. I slowly open my eyes, expecting to see bright lights, but there’s nothing but blackness. I blink a few times to make sure my eyes are actually open.

Sitting up slowly, I bring my hand to my head and rub my temples. “Shit,” I groan. *What happened last night?*

I look around the black room and finally see a soft light coming from under a door to the right. I shove off the covers and crawl out of bed. I take a step and fall to my knees. “Fuck!” I hiss as I roll over onto my back. “Son of a bitch.” I sigh as I rub my knee, trying to help the sting from my fall.

The room lights up, and I close my eyes as I cover them with my hands. “Turn it off,” I say to whoever turned it on.

“What the fuck happened?” I hear Ryder’s voice, and I sigh. “Why are you on the floor?” he asks as his voice grows closer. Seconds later, I feel his hands on my shoulders as he helps me to a sitting position.

“I fell.”

“How?”

I open my eyes to see that he turned off the bedroom light but has the bathroom door open with that light on. I look at his bed that sits on a

platform in the middle of his room. “I forgot there was a step.” I point at his bed. “I fell off it.”

I look up at him, and he is trying to hide his smile. “It’s not funny,” I say, slapping his bare chest. “It hurt.” He bursts out laughing. I shove him out of the way and stand on shaky legs.

“Let me help you,” he says, still laughing as he reaches out to me.

I shove him away. “I don’t need your help. I need to pee,” I state as I make my way to the bathroom. He stays in the bedroom while I go to the bathroom. “You can come in,” I holler as I’m washing my hands. I lean over and throw some water on my face. When I look up, I flinch. “God, I look like shit.” I’m not sure how bad I looked before I splashed water on my face, but now, black eyeliner is running down my cheeks. At least I wear waterproof mascara.

Ryder comes up behind me and kisses my bare shoulder. “I think you look beautiful,” he says, looking at me in the mirror as he stands behind me.

I shake my head as I cup some more water in my hands. Might as well take off what’s left of my makeup. When I’m done, I open my eyes to see Ryder had got me a bottle of water and Advil. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he says, standing beside me. He’s standing in front of the other sink, putting shaving cream on his face.

“What time is it?” I ask.

“Almost seven.”

I frown. “Why is it so dark in your room then?”

He smiles at me in the mirror. “I shut my curtains for you to get some sleep. You were dead to the world when my alarm went off for work, but I knew you would wake eventually. I didn’t want you to wake up with the light being too bright.”

Aww. That’s sweet. “Thank you.”

He nods. “No problem.” He places his razor on his face.

“I like the stubble,” I say with a smile.

He stops mid-stroke down the right side of his face and looks at me in the mirror. “Want me to keep it?”

I chuckle. “You’ve already started. I’m just letting you know that I find it very sexy,” I say, biting my bottom lip with a naughty smile.

He smiles. “I’m learning an awful lot about you.”

The smile drops off my face. “What does that mean?” He just shrugs and goes back to shaving. I’m not sure how much I remember of last night. I remember leaving the club. I don’t remember coming back to his apartment. I remember parts of our sex. Him on top of me. Him behind me. Me screaming his name. His lips on mine. Then nothing. “What else did you learn?” I ask, placing my hands on my hips.

He puts his razor down and cups some water in his hands. I wait impatiently as he rinses the remaining shaving cream off his face. He takes a towel off the towel rack and turns to face me. A big smile on his face.

“I know you snore.”

“I do not,” I argue.

He laughs. “You do. Like a freight train. It kept waking me up last night.”

My eyes narrow on him. “I don’t believe you.”

He leans forward and kisses me on the lips. “Don’t worry. I think it’s cute.” I jump back. “And you also agreed to have lunch with me today.”

“I did not.” *Did I?*

He nods. “You did.” He turns and walks out of the bathroom. I follow after him but can’t move as fast. I sit on his bed, careful not to fall this time as he goes into his closet. He comes out wearing a pair of black slacks, a dark blue button up shirt that’s undone, and a black tie hung loosely around his neck. “So make sure to be downstairs by noon,” he says with no room to argue. “I’ll have Milton pick you up.”

“Ryder—”

“Noon.”

“Fine,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest. “But it’s not a date.” He just smiles at me

***

I’m running around the apartment, trying to get ready for lunch with Ryder. My headache still lingers even after a thirty-minute hot bath and a cup of coffee. And plans to have lunch with Ryder were not helping. I have mixed feelings. His smile when I said this wasn’t a date made me think that’s exactly what it is. I’ve been racking my brain all morning, trying to figure out why I would agree to lunch with him today and can’t come up with anything that makes sense.

“Where are you going?” Becca asks as she comes into my bedroom.

“I have lunch plans with your brother,” I growl.

Her eyes widen. “That will be fun.”

“I guess,” I say with a shrug. I’m trying to play it cool, but I’m honestly going crazy. I’m nervous to go to lunch with Ryder. Mainly because I’m not sure what all was said last night and why I agreed to this date in the first place. “Have you heard from Conner?” I ask, changing the subject.

She giggles. “Yes. He texted me last night that it was over and that he can’t believe I let you do that to him.”

I look at her, and my mouth drops. “He really thought that it was okay to tell you how much he still loved you and then go on a date with someone else?” I snort. “Of course, he did.”

“Yes. I didn’t respond. Jaycent said I need to have my number changed.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you … What is going on with you and him?”

“Nothing,” she says too fast. I give her the *you’re lying* look, and she blushes as she looks away. “I gotta get going. I’m going to go meet my mother.” She darts out of my room.

“This isn’t over,” I say, referring to our discussion of her and Jaycent.

I quickly run into my closet and pull off Ryder’s t-shirt that I wore home this morning and sweatpants. I had put them back on after I showered. I liked how they smelled like him.

I’m jumping on one foot, placing a heel on when I look at the clock on my nightstand, coming out of my closet now dressed. I cuss myself. It’s almost a quarter till noon.

I run into my bathroom to reapply my lip-gloss and get one last look at myself. It’s been raining most of the day, so I chose to wear my hair

naturally curly. I just threw some mousse in it and put the diffuser on the hairdryer with some hairspray to make it stay. It's curled up so much that it barely reaches the top of my boobs.

I chose to do my makeup light with powder, blush, and lip-gloss. Even though it's raining here in New York at the end of May, it's still warm and muggy, so I chose to wear a pair of blue denim shorts and a plain black t-shirt with black heels. Simple and comfortable.

I reapply one more coat of lip-gloss, grab my purse, and head out the door. "Hello, Milton," I say as I exit the building.

He meets me at the stairs with a black umbrella and walks me to the back door of the Escalade. "Good afternoon, Ashlyn," he says cheerfully, opening the back door for me.

"Thank you," I say as I hop in.

He shuts the door and makes his way around the SUV to jump in behind the driver seat. I look out the window with a smile. "Good day, miss?" he asks, looking at me through the rearview mirror.

"Yes," I say although I still don't feel a hundred percent myself. My body is sore, and my head still pounds but not as bad as earlier. I should be back to myself after I get some food in me. "I love when it rains," I add. Thank God, it did. If it was a sunny day, the sun would be blinding and too much for my hangover. Even now, I still wear a pair of black sunglasses.

His brows lift as he looks at me in the rearview mirror. "Did it rain a lot where you lived before?"

I laugh. "Oh, yes. I lived in Seattle."

He chuckles. "I would say so."

I look around at all the tall buildings and yellow cabs. People walking with umbrellas, some running without them. "Where are we heading?" I ask.

"Well, Mr. O'Kane called me and said there was a change of plans. I am taking you to his office."

I frown but shrug. I can't remember the original plan. Ten minutes later, we pull up to his building, and Milton helps me out. "Whenever you are ready, just tell his assistant to call me, and I will be here to pick you up."

“That’s okay, Milton. I can take a cab.” Even if they do scare me.

“I’m a driver, ma’am. That’s my job. I will be here to take you home.” Then he turns around and gets back into the SUV.

I let out a long sigh as I step into the building. People fill the lobby and elevators ding as people get off and on, going to and from lunch. Women are dressed in business suits and dresses. Men in expensive suits and ties. I feel so underdressed.

I straighten my shoulders and walk over to the elevator. I climb in with five men and press the button for Ryder’s floor. The men talk about stocks as the elevator stops on a few floors here and there.

The doors slide open for Ryder’s floor, and I step off and through the doors of O’Kane Enterprises. I look around the quiet office and wonder where everyone is, and then realize it is lunchtime. I open my purse to pull my phone out to text Ryder that I’m here when I hear him.

“Hello, gorgeous.”

I drop my phone and look up and see him standing a few feet in front on me with a smile on his face and his hands in the pockets of his black slacks. “Hey,” I say lamely. Because saying *hello, gorgeous man* sounds stupid.

He pulls his hands out of his pockets and walks towards me. I swallow nervously as I feel my heart rate start to pick up while his eyes look me up and down. As if I take his breath away, he reaches up and loosens his tie. My body heats up as his green eyes linger on my exposed legs. They glisten from the cold rain, and my body breaks out in goose bumps. He affects me in ways that I can’t explain. “Where is everyone?” I ask, looking around trying to avoid his gaze.

“Gone,” he says simply.

I look back at him, and he’s standing right in front of me. “Thought we were going to eat,” I say slowly. Are we not leaving?

“Oh, I’m going to eat,” he says as he lowers his eyes to my lips. I lick them, and his darken with need. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from moaning.

“Ryder. I don’t think this is appropriate.” I find the words to say although all I can think of is his head between my legs. My pussy tightens.

His eyes come back to mine, and he smirks. “Come on.” He takes my hand and leads me over to what I’m guessing is his office. “Now, I know we had plans for a picnic, but since it rained, I made the best of it.” He pushes open the door, and I gasp at what I see. “I know it’s not Central Park, but it’s the best I could do with such little time.”

I turn to face him, mouth still open in awe. “Picnic …?” As soon as I ask the question, it comes back to me.

I lie in his arms satisfied and exhausted. My eyes as heavy as my body. I yawn. “Eat lunch with me tomorrow,” he says, grabbing my hand and bringing it to his lips. He softly kisses it.

I look at him as he props himself up on his left elbow and drops my hand. He places his hand on my face, and I sigh at the warmth I feel from it. “Okay,” I whisper.

“Question.”

“Anything.” Just keep touching me.

“Expensive restaurant or picnic?”

I smile. “No one’s ever asked me that before.”

He smiles. “I wanna know things about you that others don’t.”

I lie naked in bed with this gorgeous man, and he is asking me questions, trying to get to know the real me, and I’ve been trying to fight it. It’s not like I have anything to hide. I was just trying to keep him from getting close, but right now, I feel like I’m failing, which is crazy. I don’t even know this man. I open my eyes to answer, but they’re so heavy they close.

He shoves the covers off my body, and a shiver runs through me. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m cold,” I mumble, licking my lips and eyes still closed.

He leans down and places his lips gently on mine. I whimper in protest when he’s done and pulls away. “I’m horny,” he states, running his hand along the inside of my right thigh.

“Ryder …”

“Shh,” he says as his hand slides up and cups my pussy. I moan. “Just lie back and enjoy it.”

His pushes a finger into my pussy, and I arch my back as I start to pant.

"What do you want, darling?"

I open my heavy eyes and look up at him. "You. I need you to … fuck me." I don't even realize what I'm saying until after I say it. I just know that I need him inside me again.

He smiles and adds another finger. Air gets caught in my throat as he fucks me roughly with his fingers. I reach up and run my hands through my hair as my hips buck.

He removes his fingers, and I groan in protest. He gets up and straddles my hips and grabs my hands, pinning them in one of his hands above my head. I thrash back and forth to free myself. "Ryder. Please," I beg as my body shakes with need.

His other hand grabs my chin roughly and forces me to look up at him as he hovers over me. "What would you let me do to you?" he asks. "Hmm, darling? How would you let me fuck you?"

His fingers dig into my chin but not enough to hurt; just enough so I can't escape him. He licks his lips as his green eyes run over my parted lips. When they land on mine, they are on fire. "However you want," I say breathlessly.

His lips turn up as his eyes roam my face. They look above my head, and I imagine he's looking at his hand holding both of mine down. I fight against them, and his smile widens. "I was hoping you'd say that." His eyes are back on mine, and he lowers down to my face. His lips inches from mine. "I wanna tie you to my bed, baby." I suck in a ragged breath. "I think you want that, too. I want to sit back and watch you struggle, naked and bound for my pleasure." I'm panting, and my pussy is throbbing.

"I'd beg you," I say breathlessly. "I'd beg you until you gave in." He is just like me, can't hold out for too long.

He smiles. "Then I'll gag you."

I tighten my legs and moan. "Yeah." He smiles, and his eyes light up with mischief. "First, I'll undress you then tie you to my bed spread-eagle; all for me to see. Then I'll gag and blindfold you." I arch my back and take a

deep breath. “And I’ll just sit back and watch you struggle and get wetter and wetter.”

“Please, Ryder,” I beg as I lift my hips.

“Is that what you want, darling? To be completely at my mercy?”

“Yes,” I say without thought. Because I know that he won’t fail in pleasing me. And the thought of that makes me squirm. “Such a good girl.” He lets go of my chin and then his legs are spreading mine wide. I wait for his other hand to release my hands, but they don’t. I jump when his now free hand is back between my legs. I cry out when he thrusts his finger into me roughly. The second enters, and my body shakes. He returns to fucking me roughly with a force that has my breath catching in my throat and me unable to form words. I close my eyes and enjoy this gorgeous man taking me to a place that I never wanna come back from.

I come on his fingers, and I whimper as he removes them slowly. “Taste yourself, sweetheart,” he urges as he runs his wet fingers along my lips. My lips are already open due to my panting, and my tongue darts out to lick them. He slides them in, and a deep, throaty moan escapes him.

He releases my wrists, but I’m too tired to move, so I leave them above my head. He pulls his two fingers out of my mouth with a pop and then lowers his lips to mine and kisses me. A deep kiss that has him taking my breath away.

When he pulls away, I don’t open my eyes. I know I should push him onto the bed and return the favor, but I can’t. He falls down beside me and wraps his arms around me, bringing my body to his. My heart beats wild in my chest, and I’m still sucking in air as my body shakes. He holds me tightly, placing his legs over mine as we lie face to face on our sides.

I gently feel his lips on my forehead in a sweet kiss. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Hmm?”

“Picnic or fancy restaurant?”

I lick my lips and smile. “Picnic,” I whisper then everything goes black.

I turn back around and look at the red and white checkered blanket spread out on the middle of his office floor. A wicker picnic basket sits open on the right corner of the blanket. Two glasses sit on the floor next to a bucket of chilled wine.

“You did this for me?” I turn around to ask him.

He smiles softly and looks away from me as if embarrassed. I walk up to him, place my hands on his face, and lean up, kissing him. “This is the sweetest thing anyone has ever done for me,” I say. “Thank you.”

He reaches up and brushes some blond hair from my face. “You’re welcome, beautiful.”

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

RYDER

Mesmerized, I sit in the middle of the red and white checkered blanket watching Ashlyn eat strawberries. I can't get over how she looks with her hair curly. I love it, but I can't run my hands through it. I tried, and it pulled on it. I had every intention to show her Central Park and give her the picnic of her dreams, but honestly, this turned out better than I could have planned.

The rain is hitting my office windows that overlook Manhattan, and all is quiet since everyone is gone for lunch. I had my assistant running around town all morning, helping me get everything that I needed to make this happen.

Last night, she had said she loved the city, and I knew I had to use the city to my advantage. I thought what better place than Central Park. The rain had other plans.

I go over to the mini-fridge I keep in my office and pull the food out of it. "I wasn't sure what you liked, so I got you a variety," I tell her as I set three hot dogs wrapped in tinfoil down.

She unwraps them and looks up at with a smile. "Hot dogs?"

"Hey, you haven't lived until you try a New York hot dog."

"Three?"

I shrug. "I got you one with mustard, one with ketchup, and one with relish. Like I said, I didn't know which one you would like."

She laughs as she lifts the one with mustard on it and takes a bite. She mumbles her appraisal and nods her head quickly.

I grab another to-go container and place it in front of her. I open it up, and her eyes widen. "Italian."

She swallows her bite and asks, "What is that?"

“It’s pappardelle alla fiesolana,” I tell her. She grabs a plastic fork from the picnic basket and takes a bite.

“Oh, God,” she moans before taking another bite.

I grab another to-go box out of the fridge, and her blue eyes widen. “I like to eat, Ryder, but how much stuff did you get?”

I smile shyly as she looks up at me. “I wanted to make sure I got you something that you liked,” I say softly. She makes me nervous. I’ve never been that way with a woman before. I’m not the kind of guy who has to impress the girl. I’m Ryder O’Kane. Women know who I am, and they want me, usually because of my name alone, but she’s different. I wanna show her that I care and that I listen when she speaks. I wanted this date to be perfect.

She smiles up at me, and all nervousness disappears. “I’m not a picky eater.”

“Good.” I go back over to the fridge. I pull out the last two to-go boxes. I set them in front of her and open them up. “Cheesecake and chocolate-covered strawberries,” I tell her, and she licks her lips. I think it’s a success.

***

An hour later, the door opens, and I look up and see my father’s assistant standing there staring wide-eyed down at the empty to-go boxes. “Need something?” I ask.

She looks up at me and swallows as her eyes narrow. “Your father wants to see you.” Is lunch over already?

“Tell him I’ll be a minute.”

She looks over at Ashlyn. She squares her shoulders and opens her mouth. “You may leave,” I add before she can open her mouth and ruin our lunch.

She looks back at me and lets out a huff before spinning around and slamming my door shut, mumbling, “Bitch.”

I look over at Ashlyn, and she raises a dark brow in question. “Was that toward you or toward me?”

I sigh. “Probably both of us.”

She reaches down, picking up a chocolate-covered strawberry, and takes a bite out of it. Those seem to be her favorite. “So you sleep with co-workers?” she asks after she swallows her bite.

“Uh”—I run my hand through my hair nervously—“it happened once.”

She doesn’t look mad at me, just curious. “You dated her?”

I shake my head. “I haven’t been on an actual date in over a year,” I say honestly. “Until today.” And I had to trick her into it. Her getting drunk was my gain.

Her brows rise in surprise. “This isn’t a date,” she states.

“It is.”

She looks down at the last chocolate-covered strawberry and picks it up. “Then, as your date, I’m going to eat the last one.” She takes a bite out of it, and I smile.

“It’s all yours.”

***

Fifteen minutes later, I walk into my father’s office and plop down on his couch. “So you’re sleeping with my assistant,” he states, not looking up from his paperwork on his desk.

Fuck, she has a big mouth. “She told you?”

“No.” He looks up at me. “But she came in here running your name through the mud like a woman scorned. It wasn’t hard to figure out.” He leans back in his chair and crosses his arms over his chest.

“Once,” I admit.

“Goddammit, Ryder,” he snaps, standing.

“It’s not happening again,” I state.

“Damn right it’s not gonna happen again!” he growls. He presses the intercom on the phone. “Get in here,” he orders, and my back stiffens.

“Yes, Mr. O’Kane?” Jessica asks, entering the room immediately. Her nose is up in the air and her body stiff.

“You’re fired,” he says, his voice sharp.

Her mouth falls open, and she looks at me. “But … uh …” Her stiff posture falls in fear.

“Don’t look at Ryder. Look at me,” my father demands.

Her eyes go to him, and I see the tears start to well up in them. “Sir …?”

“You signed an NDA, did you not?” my father asks. She nods once. “And in that NDA, it says no fraternizing with co-workers.” She swallows and nods once again. “That includes my son. Therefore, you’re fired.”

She stands there for a few long seconds, the air in the room growing thick. My phone ringing in my pocket only heightens the tension. I see it’s my mother and press ignore.

As I pocket my phone, I look up to see the office door closing, and my father takes his seat. He looks at me, his green eyes hard as stone and jaw tight. “How many times have I told you to not mix business with pleasure?”

“You didn’t have to fire her,” I say although I can’t say I’ll miss her.

“Yes, I did.” He narrows his eyes at me. “I’m trying to run a billion-dollar company, and she was just trying to get a piece of ass.” I cringe at his word choice since that’s what I did as well. “And once you run this company, you will understand why.” He sighs heavily. “I thought you were better than this.”

“Excuse me?” I growl.

“Sleeping around with a woman at the office? Who else have you slept with here?”

I shake my head. “No one,” I say through gritted teeth. He nods as if he believes me.

“Then we have nothing else to worry about.” He tosses a file over at me, letting me know the previous conversation is over. The fact that he just fired his assistant is not even a concern. “They’ve set a date for the Anderson auction.” I avoid his eyes as I nod. “We need to come up with a price.”

“As much as it takes to ensure it’s ours,” I say, clearing my throat.

He nods. “What are you going to do once you get it?” My father may not be the best father, but he is a great boss. He believes in me here, even if I drive him nuts. He just proved it by saying *once* and not *if* I get it.

I sigh, running a hand through my hair as I sit back on his couch. “I say we sell it off. Bring in our five most reliable buyers and let them pitch us ideas of what they want to do with the property. That way we make our money back and then some.”

“Sounds like a good idea. But why don’t you wanna keep it?”

“What would I do with it? We’ll bulldoze the existing building and sell off the land. The building alone isn’t worth much. It’s old and outdated. The only reason I wanted it was for the property. To turn and sell it.” Just saying it out loud is like a punch to the gut.

ASHLYN

Milton drops me off, and I run up the stairs into my apartment building. I make sure to wipe the pads of my heels on the black rug to make sure I don’t slip and fall on the slick floors.

I make my way up to the apartment and walk in humming to myself. “Wow! The date must have gone well.”

I spin around to see Becca sitting on the kitchen counter. “What are you doing?” I ask with a laugh. “Thought you were meeting your mother?”

She shrugs. “It ended quicker than I thought.”

“Wanna talk about it?” I ask. I’ve only met her mother a handful of times, and I don’t even think she said five words to me. In her mother’s eyes, I’m nobody. I don’t have a billion dollars and knowing me won’t help her climb the social ladder. She barely looked at me. I wonder what she would do if she knew I was sleeping with her son?

“Not really,” Becca says, getting my attention. “I’m just gonna sit up here eating pickles.”

I walk over to her and take the jar from her and pull out a pickle spear. “Are you pregnant?” I ask.

She chokes on the pickle, and I have to jump out of the way to keep the piece from hitting me. “God, no!” she squeaks.

“If you were, whose would it be?” I ask, and she coughs. “I mean my money’s on Jaycent, but I would like an insider’s opinion.”

“Stop!” she says with laughter.

“I know you’re sleeping with him,” I state. “I can see it all over your face.”

Her laughter dies, and she looks down at the pickle in her hand. “You know I wouldn’t tell, Ryder, right? You can trust me,” I add.

She nods once, pushing a few strands of brown hair behind her ear. “We had sex …” She pauses. “Once.”

I frown and place the pickle back in the jar. This is gonna need my full attention. “Since we’ve been back here?”

She shakes her head. “It was a long time ago.” She starts counting on her fingers, trying to figure out the years. “Four years ago.”

“When you were in high school?”

“I had just graduated high school.” She looks up at me, and she reaches out grabbing my arm. “You have to keep this between us. Please?”

I nod quickly. “I promise.” I hold up my pinky finger, and she wraps hers around mine. Then I bring my pinky to my lips and kiss it. She does it too, sealing the promise. We drop our hands. “It was right after graduation. Dad had Ryder in Hawaii working, and he flew in just for the day to see me graduate.” She smiles as she remembers that. “After he flew out, I went to a party with Conner. Well, Conner and I ended up getting into a really big fight, and he left me there.” My eyes widen. “I tried calling him, and he shut his phone off.”

“How did you get home?” I demand. Conner has always been a fucking ass.

“Well, I went back inside and had a few more drinks.” She shrugs as if that probably wasn’t her best idea. “An hour later, I went to leave with a girl I had met there. She was gonna drive me home, but as I was going to leave, someone stepped in front of me.”

“Jaycent,” I say already smiling.

She nods and gives a rough laugh. “Yes, it was Jaycent. He had shown up sometime during the night. He said that there was no way he was letting someone drive me home who he didn’t know. So he took me home.”

“And …?”

She just stares at me, and I roll my eyes. “You gotta give me more than that,” I say.

“It was a lapse in judgment,” she says defensively.

I raise my hands. “Hey, I’m not judging you.” I give her a soft smile. “You know all of my secrets.”

She laughs softly and nods. “It just happened.” She bites her bottom lip. “In the backseat of his car.”

“What?” I ask laughing. “You had car sex?” I slap her arm. “You’re such a naughty girl.” Her face reddens, and she looks away from me. Becca is so quiet and shy when it comes to sex. She has never discussed her sex life with Conner in the four years I’ve known her, and she has never slept with anyone else as long as I’ve known her. “Wait …” I say, counting up the years.

“I cheated on Conner with Jaycent,” she whispers.

“Becca …”

“I cried after we did it,” she admits, sounding ashamed. I wrap my arms around her and hug her. “Conner never found out, but I tried to make it up to him.”

“Wait.” I pull away from her. “You’ve been with him the last four years because you were sorry about what you did with Jaycent?”

She nods as she wipes her eyes. “I had been drinking.” She grabs my upper arms, and her eyes widen. “Ashlyn, I jumped him.” I try not to laugh, and her eyes narrow on me. “Remember that party when I was eleven? The one Ryder and I were telling you about while in Panama City?” I think back to it and nod when I remember them telling me about some girl Ryder was there with who had puked in Becca’s room and she told their parents.

“Well, that same night, I saw Jaycent making out with a girl from their school. He caught me staring, and I ran off to my room crying. He had followed me. I was only eleven then and didn’t know it. But seven years later, when he drove me home from the party Conner left me at, he told me how he had read my diary that night while I cried my eyes out in the bathroom. He explained to me that over the years, as I got older, he felt the same way about me that I did about him when I was eleven.” She sighs. “I

jumped him. He didn't even have the car in park in my parents' driveway, and I was attacking him. I had always dreamed about him." She bites her bottom lip nervously. "I've always been in love with him. But I had cheated on Conner with him."

I take her hands. "Becca, you're my best friend. And I want you to listen very carefully."

She nods slowly. "You do not owe Conner shit!" I snap. "That guy treated you like shit! I do not condone cheating, but what you did to Conner wasn't cheating." I give her a soft smile. "So then what happened?"

"After we were done, he told me that he wanted to be with me. That he knew it could work." She shakes her head. "It wouldn't have worked. I was eighteen and about to leave for college. He was twenty-five and my brother's best friend. It was never going to work."

"And now?" I ask.

She smiles softly. "And now, I feel like we have a chance."

I smile and jump up on the countertop beside her, taking the jar from her once again and grabbing the same pickle. "I think you do too."

"But Ryder …"

"Honestly, Becca"—I take a bite of my pickle—"he has no clue what's going on," I say as I chew.

She laughs at that. "He's too busy with you to think of anything else."

I roll my eyes. "Please."

"I'm serious; I saw how he looked at you in Florida."

"And how was that?" I ask, taking another bite.

She tilts her head to the side, and a soft smile spreads across her face. "Like he was seeing something for the first time." I snort. "Like he was feeling something for the first time."

I look at her, and my eyes narrow on her. "You can have sex and not feel something for someone," I state.

"So you say." She jumps down off the counter. "But there's a first time for everything." Before I can respond, she continues. "Now, tell me about that date."

***

After I had finished telling Becca about my lunch date with Ryder, she got a phone call. She never told me who it was, but it was obvious it was Jaycent. I sat on her bed while she packed a bag and told me she wouldn't be home until tomorrow. I didn't ask any questions. I just eyed her up and down, looking at her cute white linen sundress and pair of light pink heels that she chose to dress in, and then watched her walk out the door.

Three hours later, I sit on my bed, the curtains open to show me Manhattan as I read *Romeo and Juliet* when I hear a familiar male's voice coming down the hallway.

I look up when I see him standing in my doorway. "Don't you knock?" I ask, trying not to smile.

Ryder shakes his head, a smirk playing on his lips. "I don't have to knock. I have a key," he says matter-of-factly.

"I don't recall allowing you a key."

"I don't recall asking," he says as his smirk grows to a full smile.

He pushes off the door and walks into the room, and he undoes the single button on his black suit jacket. I watch hungrily as his muscles flex through his shirt as he slowly slides it off his shoulders. He then tosses it on the bed.

"What if I was busy?"

"Are you?" he asks as he reaches up and loosens his tie.

My sex clenches, but I try to play it cool. "Yes," I say simply and then lower my eyes to my book. It's ripped from my hands moments later, and he tosses it to the end of the bed along with his suit jacket. "Ryder …" He grabs my ankles and yanks me down so my back is no longer against the headboard. My shirt rides up exposing my stomach, and his eyes look down at it. His gaze heats, and his tongue comes out to lick his lips.

I look up at him through my dark lashes, now breathing heavily. He moves slowly to where he hovers over me still dressed, a naughty smile spreading across his face. "I was reading that," I say breathlessly.

He buries his head in my neck, and I arch my back. The stubble rough against the skin. I break out in goose bumps. "Romeo, oh Romeo …" he

says in his best impression of a woman.

I laugh and punch him in the arm, totally ruining the moment. “Stop making fun of women everywhere.”

He gives me soft kisses up my neck until he reaches my ear. “I think that’s an exaggeration,” he whispers, his breath warm against my skin.

“No. It’s been proven,” I argue. Even I don’t believe myself.

He chuckles, and it makes a shiver run through me. “I’ll be your Romeo,” he whispers as he trails kisses along my jaw. His right hand grips my left thigh, and he lifts it as I wrap it around his hip. He pumps his hips forward, and I feel his hardness behind his slacks. *I want him!*

I run my hands down his back over his crisp shirt. “Does that mean you want me to be your Juliet?” I ask with a smile.

He pulls back from me, and my arms drop to my side, and he lets go of my thigh. He lowers his body on top of mine, his forearms holding his weight as they rest on either side of my head. He gently runs his hands through my tangled blond hair. “No,” he answers, shaking his head as his eyes follow his hand through my hair. His eyes drop to mine, and my heart picks up speed with the intense look he’s giving me. “I want you to be my Ashlyn.”

His Ashlyn? “Ryder …”

He lowers his head, closing the small space between our lips. “Shh,” he whispers against my lips. “Don’t ruin this with some stupid rule.”

I smile against his lips. That wasn’t even close to what I was thinking. “I’m all yours,” I say and then his lips are on mine.

His hands tangle in my hair as his tongue enters my mouth. I moan, lifting my hips up to his. I can feel him getting harder with every passing second. His slacks are leaving nothing to the imagination.

This kiss is different. It’s soft and sweet. His hands are in my hair, and although they are rough and needy, his kiss stays passionate, not desperate.

My hands slide down his back and over his ass. I grip it tightly, and he rocks back and forth. I pull my lips from his. “Take off your clothes,” I say, sucking in air.

He opens his mouth, but my cell starts to ring. He pulls away from me, and I reach for him. “I’ll let it ring,” I tell him, sitting up to grab him.

He picks up my phone off the nightstand and hands it to me. “It’s Becca. You should answer it.”

“But …” He leans in and gives me a soft kiss, just our lips touching.

“Gives me time to get undressed,” he says, and I smile. *Good idea*.

“Hello?” I ask, answering as he starts unbuttoning his black dress shirt while he makes his way to my bathroom. He closes the door behind him.

“Hey, you’re home, right?” she asks.

“Yeah. What’s up?” I say, my legs tightening as I hear the sink turn on. *Come fuck me!*

“I, uh, I, uh, need you to do me a favor,” she says, sounding unsure of herself.

I ignore whatever Ryder is doing in the bathroom and the throbbing between my legs to give her my full attention. “What’s wrong, Becca?”

She sighs heavily. “It’s Conner. He is coming over to the apartment. I guess he left a few things in Seattle, and he needs them.”

I roll my eyes. “Becca, we’ve been here for almost a week, and all of a sudden, he needs something. He’s lying.”

“I know but—” The sound of the doorbell ringing cuts her off. “He’s already there,” she finishes softly.

“Babe, was that the doorbell?” I hear Ryder call out from the bathroom. I ignore him.

“What?” I snap to Becca.

“He called me and was downstairs,” she says in a rush. “I spoke to the lobby guard and told them that they could let him up.”

I growl in frustration. “Fine,” I say, scooting off the bed. I pull my shirt down and fix my shorts that managed to ride up as well. I take one last quick look at the bathroom to see the door still shut.

She lets out a long breath as if she’s relaxing as I yank the bedroom door open and storm down the hallway. “Thank you, Ash. I owe you.”

“Yeah, you do,” I say, passing the kitchen and opening the door to see a pissed-off Conner standing in front of me. He wears a pair of khaki shorts

and a blue polo shirt. His black eyes narrow the moment he sees me. “Love you,” I say and hang up.

He doesn’t even wait for me to allow him in. He walks around me. “Talking to one of your fucks?” he growls. “Did Ryder already dump your ass?”

I turn around and face him. He looks around our apartment with a fucking smirk on his face. “Why are you here?” I demand, placing my hands on my hips. “We both know that you left nothing behind.”

He shrugs. “I wanted to see Becca.”

I give him a *fuck you* smile. “She’s not here.”

His black eyes slam to me, and he narrows them. “Where the fuck is she?” he demands.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” I lean forward. “Too bad I’m not gonna tell you.”

He stares at me for a few long seconds. His pissed-off look transforms into a sadistic smile and excitement in his black eyes. “So it’s just us.”

I go to tell him *no*, but instead, I say nothing. He takes a step toward me, but I pull my shoulders back and refuse to back away. “You know”—he lifts his right finger and shakes it at me—“I always knew you could act.” He laughs at his own words. “The other night at the bar.” He nods in approval. “It was very believable.” He takes another step toward me. “So much that I went home and imagined what it would be like to fuck you.” His eyes drop to my stomach, and I cringe.

“Well, that’ll never happen.”

He takes another step closer, but I still stand my ground. “I won’t lie; I’ve always been jealous of the men that you so easily threw yourself at like the cheap whore you are.” My eyes narrow on him. He looks me up and down, and his tongue licks his lips. I feel bile rise in my throat. “I’ve heard you’ll do anything.” I made a mistake of sleeping with a friend of Conner’s back in Seattle. That fucker told him everything. “But now, now that we’re alone …”

“It’ll never happen, Conner,” I state.

“Don’t you wanna know what I always dreamed of doing to you?” he asks still smiling.

“No!” I say matter-of-fact and walk past him. I’ve given him enough of my time. Ryder is in my room and waiting for me.

He grabs my upper arm as I pass him and yanks me to a stop. “Conn …”

“I’ve always wondered what it would be like to choke you.” His face is so close to mine that I can smell the stench of tequila. “To wrap my hand around your throat and watch you beg for air,” he growls as his nails dig into my skin.

I narrow my eyes on him. “Well, I’ve always wondered what you’d look like dead.”

He gives a dark laugh, and he steps closer to me, our bodies almost touching. His hand still wrapped around my upper arm. “If you take one more step, I’m gonna find out,” I warn him.

“Baby, you think you could beat me?”

I cringe at him calling me *baby* but say, “I have no doubt.”

He takes a slow, deep breath as his eyes rake over my chest and down to my legs. I suddenly hate that I’m wearing shorts. “I’ll have you on your back and my hands around your throat before you can even scream for help.”

I actually smile because I finally get to kick his ass. I yank my arm from his hold, ignoring the sting from his nails tearing it, and say, “Then what are you waiting for?”

He doesn’t wait another second; he reaches up and shoves me backward. I suck in a sharp breath from the force. Now, Conner isn’t a big guy. He’s a little over six feet and maybe a hundred and sixty pounds.

But while I try to right myself, he runs at me, and with his weight and speed behind him, he throws his body into mine. Knocking me backward even farther, I hit the front door. My head bangs against it, and I go to cry out, but his hand has already wrapped around my throat. I try to suck in a breath, but his hand tightens. He smiles down at me as my throat starts to burn. I am able to get enough space between us, and I lift my knee to knock

him in the dick. “Shhhhiiiittt,” he says gasping for air as he takes a step back.

I suck in a long breath that burns my already aching throat, reach over, and grab the first thing I see, which is a glass bowl off the table in the entryway. I swing it at him just as he stands. He lifts his forearm to block it. The glass bowl and the glass balls inside of it go flying into the air before everything hits the floor and shatters to a million little pieces. I feel a few glass pieces cut my legs.

“Fucking bitch,” he sneers. “You’ll pay for that.”

I smile even as my throat continues to burn. “Bring it, fucker.”

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

RYDER

I slide my shirt off my shoulders and pause. “Ashlyn?” I call out. It sounded like… breaking glass?

She doesn’t answer. I open the bathroom door, the air whooshing from the force. “Babe?” I ask when I don’t see her on the bed or anywhere else in the room. I thought I heard the doorbell ring earlier, but when she didn’t answer me, I thought I was hearing things.

“Fucking bitch!” I hear a man say roughly.

I run out of the bathroom and through her bedroom. When I come down the hallway, I see Ashlyn punching a guy in the face. She hits him with a right hook, and he blocks it then shoves her backward. She trips as she steps in a pile of shattered glass. Her back hits the kitchen table and she spins around, reaches out, and grabs the glass vase. She spins around just in time to hit him in the face with it.

“Ashlyn!” I snap out of whatever daze I’m in and grab the guy as he goes for her again. I pull him by his shirt just as his hand tangles in her hair. She lets out a scream as he pulls her with us by her hair. She falls to the ground, knocking over a chair with her. And I shove him up against the wall.

His black eyes widen when he sees who has him by the fucking throat. “Ryd…” I squeeze harder, cutting off his air.

“Ashlyn,” I growl her name, trying to understand what the fuck is happening. “Talk to me, babe. You okay?” I ask not taking my eyes off him. My heart beats wildly in my chest in fear of her. My mind tries to piece together why the fuck I have Conner by the throat.

“Yeah,” she responds, clearing her throat. “I’m fine,” she says angrily.

I let out a long breath as my muscles flex. “What the fuck are you doing here, Conner?” I snap.

He can’t answer. Not with my hand around his throat. His face is turning red and his lips purple. They are parted as if he is trying to breathe, and his hands grip my wrist. His hands loosen, and his eyes start to roll to the back of his head. I let go of the sorry bastard, and his body goes limp, but he’s able to stay upright.

I give him my back while he coughs and sputters. She’s in the process of standing from the dining room floor, and I go to reach for her hand to help her when I’m hit from behind.

We fall to the floor, and Conner lets out a scream of frustration as he sits on top of me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ashlyn stand and her blue eyes murderous as they look at Conner. She starts for him …

I punch him in the face.

His head snaps back, and I shove him off me. He rolls to a stop on the hardwood floor and spits out blood. Ashlyn comes to a stop. “Go get my phone. And call down to security,” I tell her as I pat down my pockets on my slacks. I had my phone in my suit jacket that is on her bed.

She just stands there, her neck red with what looks like fingerprints. My jaw tightens as I look at the trail of blood running down her leg from what looks like a cut. A bruise covers her right upper arm. You can tell by the outline that it’s from his hand. Her chest rises and falls fast as her eyes are trained on him. I can see her body shaking from here. “Ashlyn,” I snap. “Go call them. Now,” I yell.

She doesn’t even flinch at my tone, but her eyes slowly turn to me. What I see in them makes me nervous. Her beautiful blue eyes are dark. So dark they look unrecognizable. She opens her mouth to argue, and I point at the hallway. “Fucking go!” I shout.

With one last look of hatred, she turns around and runs off to her room.

I look down at Conner. He still sits on the floor, blood running from his mouth. “Get up,” I growl. “Get the fuck up,” I shout as I kick him in the side. “You wanna fight? Let’s fight.” I put up my fists. “I’ve wanted to kick your ass for years,” I say with a smile.

He finally stands on shaky knees. He lifts his hands, and his eyes look at me. But they go past me and look down the hallway. He smiles, and his

once white teeth are stained red from my punch to his face a moment ago. “So still fucking the whore, are you?” He looks at me and laughs. “You know”—he reaches up and wipes the blood from his chin—“I used to share a room with Becca right beside Ashlyn.” He leans in closer and whispers, “I used to lie awake and listen to her scream out Bradley’s name.” My heart beats so hard in my chest, my ears are pounding. “Then you went and fucked her.” He looks me up and down with disgust. “How does it feel to know that no matter what you do, she’ll always go back to him?”

True hatred wells up inside me for this fucker. “I’m gonna enjoy this,” I growl from deep within my throat.

He swings his right fist, and I duck. I run forward, wrapping my hands around his waist and picking him up off the ground. He doesn’t come to a stop until we hit the countertop in the kitchen. I punch him in the face once, twice. Three times. His head snaps back, and his body goes limp. I take a step back, breathing heavily, and his head falls to the kitchen floor.

I drop to my knees and straddle his chest. I grab his collar, and his head hangs to the side, his eyes starting to swell shut. “Listen here, you little fuck!” I growl, giving him a little shake. “You stay the fuck away from my sister. And you stay the fuck away from my girl.” I shove him back, and his head hits the tile floor. “Next time, I will kill you.” His body falls to the floor, and he lets out a moan of pain as he curls up in a ball.

I turn around just in time to see Ashlyn opening the front door to allow the apartment security to enter.

***

“Thank you,” I tell the three security men who assist Conner out of the girls’ apartment. I slam the door shut and look down at the mess we’ve made. Glass covers the floor, blood staining the white floors in the entryway and the kitchen, both from Conner. The kitchen chair is still turned over on its side.

I try to loosen my tight muscles by rolling my shoulders. I decide to leave it all how it lies and make my way down the hallway and through

Ashlyn's bedroom. I then enter the bathroom and hear the shower running. I yank the glass door open to see Ashlyn standing under the sprayer. My chest rises and falls quickly as I breathe heavily. My muscles tight and nostrils flared. "Ashlyn," I snap.

Her hands stop midway through her hair, and she steps out from under the sprayer and looks at me. Her eyes narrowed at me as if I did something wrong. "What?" she asks as if she wasn't just in a fight with Conner.

"What?" I growl. "What?" I step in not caring that I still have my dress slacks on and slam the door behind me. It rattles from the force. "*What* is all you have to fucking say?" I shout, feeling my lungs burn. My entire body shakes with anger. Fear. How did I not know he was here? "Why didn't you tell me he was coming over?" I demand.

"I had no clue he was coming over," she snaps back. "Your sister called me and said he was coming up."

"Why would she do that?" I shout.

"I don't fucking know," she yells back.

I take a step back from her and run a hand through my hair. My right side is soaking wet from the sprayer. My slacks heavy on my hips. I let out a shaky breath.

"What do you want me to say?" she demands, placing her hands on her hips. Her attitude pissing me off more.

I step back into her. "I want you to say that you didn't try to fight a guy who is double your size," I say, getting in her face.

"Please. I could have taken him."

My eyes widen. "Really? 'Cause that's not what I saw when I ran in and saw his hands on you." I'm screaming in her face. I'm losing control. I keep telling myself to step back, to calm down, but the longer I look at her, the angrier I get.

She pushes her chest into mine, her eyes narrowed and her lips in a thin line. I fist my hands down by my side. "If you're looking for me to apologize, it's not gonna happen."

She's fucking driving me mad and not in a good way. "I'm looking for you to admit that you can't do what your mind tells you it can do." Does

she honestly think she can take on a man double her size? Yes, she does. I've seen her try to do it twice before today.

She reaches up and pokes a finger in my hard chest. Her nails press into my skin. "Why don't you hold your breath while you wait for that?" She arches a brow in challenge.

I take a deep breath as I try to calm my nerves. I'm all worked up. Conner being here pissed me off. The fact that I beat the shit out of him made me feel a little better until I turned to see Ashlyn standing in the doorway and really got to look at her. Her hair a mess, her neck reddened, and her chest rising and falling fast with every breath she took. I felt murderous.

She pulls away from me, opens the glass door to exit and I grab her upper arm, yanking her back. I shove her back against the cold tile. She hisses in a breath, looking up at me as I cage her in with my body. The water hits us full force, pulling down my soaking wet slacks. "Ryder …"

I slam my lips on hers. I run my hands up her sides and cup her tits. She pushes her hips into mine as her hands wrap around my waist, pulling me closer to her. She moans into my mouth as her body melts into mine instantly. I pull away panting. "Don't ever do that again," I say roughly.

She shakes her head, her hands flying to the waistband of my slacks. She pops out the button followed by the sound of my zipper. "Never," she whispers with a smile on her face, telling me she's lying as she shoves my wet and heavy slacks down my legs along with my boxers. I step out of them and kick them to the side. They hit the shower floor and water splashes on my legs.

She wraps her hand around the base of my hard cock. I groan and pull her hand away, pinning her hands above her head. "I'm serious," I say, lowering my head down to hers.

She bumps her forehead into mine. "Stop thinking I'm the type of girl who changes for a man." She gives me a *fuck you* smile. She's good at those. "Because I'm not gonna change who I am for you, Ryder."

My jaw tightens, and I have to bite my tongue to keep from telling her exactly how I feel about that statement. Instead, I decide to go with a

different approach. I know exactly how to get her to listen to me. And it has everything to do with my cock and her pussy.

I place both of her wrists in my left hand and tighten my hold. She whimpers as that smile wipes off her face. My right hand slides down her flat stomach and over her shaved pussy. I run two fingers over her wet lips. She sucks in a ragged breath when I slip a finger into her. “So wet …” I say, and she whimpers.

I remove my finger from her pussy and grip her thigh. I yank her leg up and wrap it around my hip. Taking my hard cock in my hand, I ram it into her tight pussy. She cries out as she arches her back.

Letting go of her hands, I place both of my hands on her ass and pick her up. I pound into her as the water hits our bodies. Our kisses are wet and our bodies’ slick. Her hair sticks to her face, and her nipples hard against my bare chest.

“Ryder …”

I place my hand over her mouth, and she closes her eyes as she mumbles into it. “I don’t wanna hear you,” I say roughly. She whimpers and thoughts of what Conner said come back to me. *I used to hear her scream as Bradley would take her.*

I fuck her harder! Anger and pure jealousy take over my mind.

Her head falls from side to side as I pump into her, her back sliding up and down the tiled wall. My legs strain as my wet feet try to slip while I stand in the water. My right arm grows tired as I hold her up with it, my other hand still over her mouth.

Removing my hand from her mouth she sucks in a ragged breath. I drop her to her feet, and she sways. I grab her arm and shove the glass door open, pulling her out of the shower, and she inhales sharply when the cold air hits her soaked body.

“Bend over,” I say as I place her in front of me tangling my hands into her wet hair.

“Ryder …”

I lean over her back, my hard cock presses against her ass. “Stop talking,” I say into her ear, “and just do what you’re told.”

Her body shivers, but she places her hands on the counter, bending at the waist. I press her down further by her hair, her chest and stomach on the countertop and she hisses in a breath.

I spread her legs far apart, and without warning, I grab my cock and ram into her. She arches her back, and she cries out. My hands tighten in her hair as I start to move.

Anyone who can hear her right now will hear her yelling my name tonight. Over and over. Until I decide I'm done with her.

ASHLYN

I sit on one of the white leather couches in my and Becca's apartment. Becca and Jaycent sit across from me on the other white leather couch. I tilt my head from side to side, trying to ease the soreness in my neck. Ryder took me three times in a matter of two hours. To say my body has been royally fucked is an understatement. But it was worth it. I've always liked my sex rough, and Ryder has yet to disappoint me.

I place my cherry sucker into my mouth as Becca stares at me wide-eyed. "You're joking."

Pulling the sucker out of my mouth with a pop, I shake my head. "I'm not."

"What the hell did you do?" Jaycent asks before taking a sip of his beer. His knuckles white from his tight grip.

After Ryder had finished taking his anger out on me—he called Becca and told her what happened with Conner. Then he called Jaycent to fill him in. Thankfully, Ryder hasn't asked why she and Jaycent arrived at the same time. I think he's still too busy being worked up about what happened to put two and two together.

"Ryder kicked his ass," I say with a smile. God, I had been waiting a long time to watch Conner get his ass beat. If you ask me, he got off easier than he deserved, but still, I enjoyed it.

Ryder enters the living room, two beers in his hands. He leans over the back of the couch and kisses my hair. It's a soft kiss to let me know that he

can still be tender. I wish I could tell him I don't require such affection.

He then walks around and sits down next to me. He places his arm on my shoulder and pulls me to his side. I go willingly and let out a long sigh. I'm getting used to this damsel in distress, even if I did want to take care of Conner myself.

"I didn't do much," he says with a shrug, handing me my beer.

I laugh. "Oh, whatever." I take a sip of my beer and smile at him. "You kicked his ass, and it was beautiful." I place my sucker back in my mouth. His eyes lower to my lips, and I suck harder, my cheeks caving in at the action.

Everyone laughs, and Ryder leans to my ear. "Are you trying to show me what I have to look forward to?"

I ignore him, and he reaches up and pulls it from my lips with a popping sound. He sticks it in his mouth, and I feel my pussy clench, reminding me that I'm still very sore from earlier. He hands me back my sucker and looks at Becca. "Where were you?" he asks her, and her laughter dies immediately.

"I was out shopping," she says without thought, but I don't miss the cringe at her own words.

"You hate shopping," Ryder says.

She shrugs. "I needed a new dress for your birthday party." Nice lie although she can't look at him as she says it.

He nods his head as if that's believable. "Well, I alerted security about him. And told them that if he is even seen entering the building to call the cops."

"Did you file a report?" Jaycent asks.

Ryder shakes his head. "I didn't even involve the cops. I let the apartment security handle it. The less we have to deal with the police, the better."

"Do you think he'll press charges?" Becca asks with worry in her voice.

"Fuck no," Ryder says with confidence. His eyes slide over to me as I lick my sucker. Then he returns to his sister. "He has no case. He came into your apartment and attacked *my* girl." I hide my smile behind my sucker.

That’s the second time he’s said that. The first time was earlier when he was beating up Conner. I don’t know why hearing it makes me feel all warm inside. “He has no case,” he repeats. “And he knows I could bury him so deep that he would never have a chance.”

“You’re so arrogant,” I say with a flirty smile. Am I smiling because Conner got his ass beat or because every time I sleep with Ryder, it gets better and better?

He raises a brow. “You call it arrogant. I call it confidence.” I roll my eyes.

Jaycent takes a quick look over at Becca. It’s funny to watch them. They’re so obvious. They are sitting on the couch across from us at opposite ends of it. As if there’s an imaginary person between them. “You probably shouldn’t stay here,” he tells her.

She opens her mouth to protest, but Ryder beats her to it. “I agree.” Becca looks at Ryder with a frown. “You need to go stay at Mom and Dad’s.”

She starts shaking her head quickly. “I’ll be fine here,” she says, lifting her chin.

Ryder runs a hand through his hair. It’s still fairly damp from our shower. I look over his black button up and black slacks. I had washed them before Becca and Jaycent arrived. “I guess I could stay here with you ladies.” He looks over at me and winks. I pick up the yellow throw pillow and toss it at his face. He shoves it away and yanks me closer to him. He gives me a rough kiss that leaves me dizzy.

When I manage to pull away, I look over at Becca, and she is looking at Jaycent with a look of disappointment. I turn back to Ryder. “Why don’t I stay with you?” I offer.

“I don’t think …”

“That’s a great idea,” Becca says excitedly.

Ryder looks at her and frowns. “Who will stay with you?’

“Jaycent can stay with her,” I say, and Becca’s smile widens. Jaycent raises his hand and scratches the back of his neck, obviously very uncomfortable that I just offered up his services to his best friend’s sister.

Ryder looks at me, his brown brows pulled together in confusion. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea,” he says slowly.

“Babe,” I say, placing my hand on his shirt. I feel his heart beat quickly underneath it. Am I doing that to him? Or is he still worked up from the fight? “There are four bedrooms in this apartment.” I lean and whisper in his ear. “He’s already taken care of Conner once. Who else would you trust to protect her?”

He pulls away and sits silently as he looks over at Becca. Her smile widens before it falls. Her eyes dart from mine to Ryder as if she’s trying to think of what I just told him. I hope she knows that I would never rat Jaycent’s and her situation out.

“I think Mom’s—”

“I saw Mom earlier today for lunch,” she interrupts Ryder. “It lasted twenty minutes, Ry.” He sighs as if he already knows what she’s about to say. “All she wanted to do was talk about Conner.” Jaycent’s eyes darken two shades, and I watch his cheekbones sharpen.

Ryder looks over at Jaycent, who lifts his beer and takes a sip, trying to hide his anger. I’m not sure if Ryder notices it, but I do. “Do you mind?” Ryder finally asks. “If not, I can stay here with them—”

“Ry, don’t be stupid. You should stay at your place,” Becca interrupts him.

“I don’t mind,” Jaycent says, his voice rough. He clears his throat.

I watch Becca’s body tense, and Ryder looks at me. I give him an encouraging smile. “See. No reason to worry,” I tell him, patting his thigh.

“Okay.” He nods, looking back to them. “It’ll just be for tonight. I’ll call down to the office in the morning and have extra security placed in front of your door.

“Ry—”

“This isn’t up for debate, B,” he interrupts her. “I want you girls safe. And safety means more security.”

I lean in and kiss his cheek. “Want another beer?” I ask him. He nods, and I get up from the couch to make my way to the kitchen. Ryder had

helped me clean it up while his clothes were in the dryer earlier. As I close the fridge, Becca is standing in front of me.

“I owe you big time,” she says with a smile. Her big green eyes look over at Jaycent in the living room.

“You owe me twice,” I say, returning her smile before placing my sucker back in my mouth.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

RYDER

An hour later, we walk into my bedroom, and Ashlyn drops her overnight bag carelessly on the floor. “Jenna is going to be mad at you.”

She looks at me over her shoulder as she heads to the bathroom. “Who is Jenna?”

“She is my maid. And she doesn’t like it when my room is messy.” She laughs. “She comes twice a week,” I inform her.

Her laughter grows. “If you’re so clean, then why do you have a maid?”

“She does more than just clean.”

She comes to a stop and turns to face me, her blond hair falling over her shoulder. “Like what?”

“Laundry. Cooks. Stuff like that.”

She arches a brow. “So she’s like your girlfriend without the sexual benefits? Or do you guys have sex?”

I shake my head quickly. “Never slept with her. And I’ve also never had a girlfriend, but I think they do more than cook and clean,” I say, giving her a smirk. I may tend to use women for sex, but I know there’s more to them than taking care of a man.

She frowns. “You’ve never had a girlfriend?”

“I’ve dated. Does that count?”

She tilts her head to the side as if she considers it. “Not the same.”

“What about you? Ever had a boyfriend?” The thought of anyone else touching her makes my jaw clench. Conner and Bradley come to mind, and I fist my hands down by my side. I feel so protective of her.

She nods. “A couple.” I allow my eyes to sweep over her exposed legs in a pair of white cotton shorts. She wears my t-shirt from Panama City, and I love the fact that it’s so long on her that it hides her shorts, making her look

like she has nothing else on but my shirt. I lick my lips, wanting to push my shirt up and slip my hardening cock into her wet pussy. I can't get enough of her.

"Guess they weren't serious?" I say, clearing my throat. Stay focused, Ryder. She's actually opening up about herself.

She shakes her head. "They would have to stay faithful in order for that to happen."

I can't imagine someone not wanting her to themselves. I can't imagine another man wanting someone else when they have her. Idiots.

I say nothing to that, and she looks down at her hands, inspecting them as if they're something foreign. When she looks up at me, she has a frown on her lips. "I'm a selfish person."

My brows draw together. "What? No, you're not, Ash."

She gives a dry laugh. "I am, Ryder. People see love as a selfless act. They say *I'll die for you*. But I don't see love that way. I see love as a selfish act." She takes a deep breath. "You see it all the time. Married couples say if I die, I want you to move on. Get married. Fall in love." Her brows pull together. "It's not that I don't believe in love because I do. I just believe that there's only one true love out there for you. And once you lose it, no one else ever fills that hole. When I fall in love, I want someone who, when I die, they can't imagine having feelings for anyone else. I want to consume someone so much that when they lose me, they can't breathe." Her eyes meet mine, and I see all that passion in them. How deeply she will love if someone would just give her the chance. I wanna be that chance. "That's how I will love someone, and I want that in return. And that is selfish."

I make my way over to her. I slide my hand into her curly blond hair, and she tilts her neck back to look up at me. "There's nothing selfish about wanting to be loved like you deserve."

Her hands come up, and she places them on my chest. It rises and falls slowly as I breathe deeply. "I want what others aren't willing to give. And I refuse to settle when I know what I want."

"You shouldn't."

“I’m fine with being alone,” she says softly as if trying to convince herself.

“You don’t have to be alone, sweetheart,” I say truthfully.

“I’m better off that way.”

I let out a long sigh as I pull her to me. She looks up at me, her blue eyes searching mine. “Are you telling me that you would rather be alone right now than be in my arms?” I ask, searching her face. The marks on her neck have long faded. The bruise on her upper arm is still there, but that’s the only reminder of Conner’s visit tonight.

“Which would you prefer?” she asks, deflecting.

I reach up and cup her warm cheek and smile down at her. “I wanna be where I am. Right here with you,” I tell her honestly.

“Why?” she asks, her brows pulling together as if she can’t understand why I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.

“Why not?” She sighs, and I lean down pressing my lips to hers. “Stop worrying,” I say softly. “Just relax and be here with me. Can you do that?”

Her breathing is ragged, and I can feel her heart beat against mine. She’s confused. That I know. She was all smiles and giddy downstairs while we spoke to my sister and Jaycent. And then it’s like a switch was turned, and she is able to shut off whatever feelings she had for me. All I have to do is say one wrong word, and she places that wall up. I’m gonna break it down; it’s just gonna take time.

***

“Tell me more about your parents,” I say, lying in bed next to her. Her hand rests on my chest while she lies curled up to my side. I lie on my back, my hand absentmindedly running through her hair. “I bet they miss you.”

She nods. “They do. My mother calls me several times a day, begging me to come home. She told me yesterday that she’s looking for houses here in New York, trying to get my dad to move here, but he says everything she finds is way too expensive.” She laughs.

“What do they do?”

“They’re both attorneys.”

Impressive. “You didn’t want to follow in their footsteps?”

She shakes her head softly. “My mother is a divorce attorney, and my father is a criminal law attorney. They never once tried to steer me in that direction, and I’m thankful because I never wanted that.”

“What about brothers or sisters?” I press for information about her.

“No. It’s just me.” She pauses. “Although they think of Becca as their child. My mother calls her every day too.”

My hand stops brushing her hair, and she props up on her elbow to look down at me. I place my hands behind my head, lacing my fingers together to prop my head up. “What about your parents?”

“What about them?” I ask, not wanting to talk about them.

“Becca doesn’t speak of them much,” she admits with a frown. “I’ve met your mother five times and your father twice. Are you closer to them since you’ve lived here?”

“I can’t say that makes a difference.” I let out a long breath. “My mother is more obsessed with herself than anyone else in this world, but I’m sure you already know that. And my father is married to his work. It’s his life.”

“Is that the kind of life you want?” she asks.

“I’ve never really thought about it.” *Until now.* “I’m kinda like my father in that aspect. I plan to run that company one day, so I’ve been working my ass off to show him that. But I believe there’s more out there than living and breathing O’Kane Enterprises.”

She smiles brightly, making her blue eyes shine. Her previous reservations about us are no longer on her mind. “Did you always want to run O’Kane Enterprises?”

I nod awkwardly. “Yes. My grandfather started it, and my father took over after he passed. That was over twenty years ago.”

“When do you plan to take it over?”

“Like I said, my father lives and breathes that job. It will probably take a decline in his health to make him step back in order for me to take it over.” Lord knows it won’t be my mother stopping him.

“How long have you been there?”

I smile, liking that she wants to know about me. “After high school graduation, I went to Brown for five years to get my masters in business management. Then I came back to New York and started at the company. I’ve been there for five years now.”

She covers her mouth as she yawns. I lean up and kiss her forehead. “You need some rest,” I say, and she lays her head on my chest. Her arm curls around my bare chest to my side.

I unlink my fingers from behind my head and slide down onto the bed more. I turn onto my side and pull her to me. Our legs tangle with one another, and I close my eyes, taking a deep, calming breath. Nothing has ever felt so right. So comfortable. Within seconds, her breathing evens out and her arms loosen around me as she falls into a deep sleep.

I kiss her hair and run my hand down the soft skin of her back as I close my eyes.

ASHLYN

The following morning is hectic, to say the least. I had to go down to my apartment to shower and get ready. Today is my first day at work, and I’m a little nervous.

I stand in the kitchen making a pot of coffee as Ryder walks through the front door like it’s his. “Morning,” I say with a smile.

He walks right over to me and kisses me on the forehead. My smile widens, and I hate that I can’t control it. “Morning, beautiful.”

“What are you doing down here? I told you I would be up once I was done getting ready.” He wanted me to stay in his apartment this morning to get ready with him, but that’s just not possible when all of my bathroom stuff’s down here. I had taken a bag up there last night, but it didn’t have everything that I needed to get ready for my first day.

“I wanted to come and see if the security was here.”

“They are,” I growl. Two very huge, unfriendly men stand in front of our apartment door. They studied my ID for five minutes before they let me in.

He turns to look at me as he begins to tie the black tie that hangs around his neck. “They’re for your protection.”

I roll my eyes as I pour some coffee into a mug for him. “I don’t need protection.”

His eyes narrow on me as if to say *don’t start*. I shut my mouth and hand him his cup. “Here you go.”

“Thanks, darling. Where is Becca?” he asks, looking around the silent apartment.

“She’s still asleep,” I say, not really knowing where she is. For all, I know she left last night and went back to Jaycent’s, but he nods as if believing me.

“You ready to go?” he asks. I frown at his words. He steps into me and brushes some blond hair off my face. “I want you to ride with me to work. Milton and I will drop you off.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I am,” he says and snatches my purse off the countertop.

We walk out of the apartment, both men grunting as they sit on what looks like the most uncomfortable metal chairs. I swear they’re twins. They are both taller than Ryder is, so they have to be at least six-foot-four. They wear three-piece suits and have earpieces. I’m not sure who they talk to with them. I wanted to ask them but decided the less I spoke to them, the better.

We sip our coffee quietly while we stand in the elevator. I hide my smile as I look at my purse slung over his forearm. He looks so confident in his crisp white button up shirt and black slacks. I slowly look him up and down, and I lick my lips without thought. I still can’t believe what I’m doing. I’m not even sure what it is I’m doing with him. Am I feeding some sick fantasy? One minute, I’m smiling like a fool at the way he calls me darling, and then the next, I’m shutting him out and telling myself to take a step back. It’s temptation at its finest. Or self-destruction. Either way, it’s like jumping out of a plane with no parachute, knowing I’m going to hit the ground with a force that no one could survive. But the view on the way down will be worth the sacrifice of my dignity and my life.

I look away from him and in front of me. My eyes meet his in the mirrored doors. His eyes stare into mine as if searching for something. Had he been watching me watch him the entire time? If so, he doesn't say. "Are you nervous?" he finally asks as it dings and the doors slide open.

"Kinda."

"Don't be. You have nothing to worry about," he says as if he's known for me for years.

We walk through the lobby and out into the summer morning of Manhattan. I see Milton standing at the bottom of the curb with the back door open.

"Good morning, Milton."

"Morning, Ashlyn." He nods his head to me as I climb in. "Mr. O'Kane."

Ryder slides in behind me, and Milton gets into the driver's seat. I sip my coffee as Ryder sits beside me quietly, sipping his coffee. His eyes scan some papers as he gets ready for his day. I sit back and admire him again. His sharp jaw is covered in stubble, and I smile at the fact he hasn't shaved since I told him I liked it. His black suit jacket is hanging over the seat in front of him, and his tie keeps falling in his way as he looks down at his papers. He finally throws it over his shoulders, and I smile into my mug.

Traffic is stop-and-go but mainly stop. People crowd the streets and sidewalks. I look out the window and up at the buildings with a smile. Still amazed that I live here.

My phone pings in my purse, and I dig it out and open up the private chat between my family members—*my bitches*.

Does this look infected? my aunt asks, sending us all a picture of a pimple that looks to be up in her nose. She used the flash, but all I see is the white head at the tip and nose hairs. Lots of them. Ew.

I can't tell, I respond. She reads it and texts back immediately.

Ashlyn, how is New York?

Wonderful, I respond.

Aww, my beautiful daughter. I miss you so much, my mother adds to the conversation.

I hold my phone up and push the button indicating forward-facing camera. I pucker up my lips as I'm giving her a kiss. Just as I take the photo, Ryder leans in and kisses my cheek.

I laugh as I look at it, my lips puckered, my eyes closed. Ryder's right hand is cupping my left cheek, and his lips are puckered on my right cheek, his eyes open. It's the best picture I've ever taken.

Ryder takes my phone and looks at it. He smiles and then starts to back out of it. "Hey, now …" I reach for my phone, but he lifts his shoulder and turns his back to me. "Ryder, you'd better not …" He spins it back around and holds it up. He sent the picture to my family chat. I cringe as I see my mother just saw it. And then my aunt … My phone dings.

Holy hell, who the fuck is that hottie? my aunt asks.

Ryder texts her back before I can get it from him. *My boyfriend.*

"Ryder," I growl, trying to get my phone again. He easily keeps it from me.

"Ryder, my mom is gonna be …" My phone starts ringing in his hand, and Momma lights up my screen. A pic of her and me standing in front of our Christmas tree last year.

He answers and immediately places it on speakerphone. "Ashlyn LeAnn Whitaker." She says my full name, and I glare at Ryder.

"Hey, Momma."

"Why didn't you tell me you are seeing Julian O'Kane?" When I had googled him, I found out that his legal name is Julian. He goes by his middle name, Ryder. Becca had never mentioned this to me. I've always known him as Ryder, yet I haven't asked why. When he feels like telling me, he will.

My brows lift. "You know who he is?" I didn't even know who he was when I first met him.

"Of course," she says. "You don't allow your daughter to move across the world"—I roll my eyes at her dramatics but smile—"and not know who she is going to be spending time with." I go to open my mouth, but she continues. "Is it serious?" I can hear the hurt in her voice. My mother and I have always been close. She felt like me moving away was going to tear us

apart. She would be so hurt if I didn't tell her what was going on between Ryder and me.

"No," I tell her to not upset her.

"I Googled him," she admits, and I laugh. I look up at Ryder, and my laughter dies at the look on his face as he stares down at me with a look I can't quite explain. His eyes search my face and land on my lips. I lick them without thought.

"I'm glad you're happy," my mother says, getting my attention. "I just miss you so much."

"I miss you too, Momma."

"I think I have empty nest syndrome." I laugh again. "It's true, you know?"

"You're gonna be okay, Mom," I assure her.

"When are you coming home?"

"Maybe next month," I say, not really knowing. It could be three months from now for all I know.

"Will Ryder be joining you?"

"Oh, no. He's busy with work," I say quickly. There's no telling when this thing with him will end. My chest tightens at that thought.

She sighs. "I love you, Ashlyn. Just make sure that man is good to you. You deserve the best."

"It's not like that."

There's a long pause. "So … he's like Bradley?" My mother and I have no secrets. She knows that Bradley and I are friends who have sexual relations. She may have not agreed with it, but she never voiced her opinion on that situation.

"Yes," I say simply.

She sighs loudly. "Well, just be safe. And have a great first day at work."

"I will, Momma. I've gotta go," I say, trying to cut this short before she says anything else. She has no idea Ryder is listening. "I love you." I reach out and hang up while she says I love you too.

I sit back in my seat and go to take a sip of my coffee, but the cup stops halfway as I spot Ryder now staring at me. "What?" I ask.

He leans into me, sliding his hand into my hair, and before I can take in another breath, his lips are on mine. He kisses me with force. His lips bruising mine. His teeth nibbling on my bottom lip, and his body pressing into mine. When he pulls away, I'm breathless.

Then without a word, he pulls away and goes back to reading his paper, not saying a word.

Okay. I let out a long breath. My phone dings, and I ignore it. It's probably just my aunt. I place my phone in my purse as the Escalade comes to a stop. "Thank you for the ride," I say, clearing my throat. Confusion clouds my mind at what is happening. Bradley and I were never like this. We didn't pretend to be a couple. When we had dinner or breakfast, it wasn't a date. It was two friends with the added bonus of sex. How have we crossed that line?

"Anytime," Milton says, getting out and opening my door.

I turn to look at Ryder, and he's staring down at his coffee mug with a frown on his face. "What's wrong?"

He looks up at me. "Why does my coffee cup say I've been poisoned?" His voice is full of worry, and his dark green eyes wide.

I take it from his hands and look down at it. I smile. The outside of the cup reads *Have a nice day*. However, written on the bottom of the inside reads

Jk

Die, fucker!

You've been poisoned!

I laugh, the sound breaking some of the tension. "I bought it for Conner on his birthday a few years ago. Should I be hurt that he didn't think to take it?"

"He's so ungrateful," he says with no humor in his voice.

"Right?" I say, smiling. He doesn't return it. The air between us thickens, and I clear my throat, trying to figure out why things feel so awkward all of a sudden. Why did he kiss me like he did with no explanation? "Thanks for the ride," I say, sounding like I'm shy. I wanna smack myself.

He looks at me with no smile, just a blank look. An expression I rarely see him wear. I wait another second, expecting him to kiss me goodbye, and then I shake my head. *You don't need a kiss goodbye!* I slide out and thank Milton one last time.

"Ashlyn?"

I turn back to look at him through the open door. "Have a great day. I'll be here to pick you up." Then without another word, Milton shuts the door.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

RYDER

She compared me to Bradley!

I couldn't hide how much that fucking stung. I couldn't force a fucking smile if my life depended on it. Instead, I kissed her. I thought I could show her that I meant more to her. That I wanted more from her. But when I pulled away, I saw it in her eyes. The confusion. She doesn't know what she wants—what she's doing—and I don't wanna push her. Scaring her away would only hurt us both. So instead, I shut her out like she does me at times.

"Ryder?"

"What?" I snap looking up from the black marble conference table to a set of dark green eyes narrowed on me.

"Am I interrupting your quiet time?" my father asks.

I shake my head as I run my hand through my hair. "No," I answer with a sigh.

He arches a brow. He doesn't believe me. I lean back in my chair and run my hand down my unshaven face—tired and my mind consumed by her. The girl has sucked me in.

He lifts his right hand and snaps his fingers. "Everyone out," he orders.

"I took notes," Kelly, my assistant, says as she stands from the seat beside me. "I'll place them in your office for you."

I nod. "Thanks."

She leaves, followed by the six men who had been in the meeting.

My father shuts the door after the last guy leaves and looks at me. "You need to come off whatever is bothering you," he orders.

"Nothing," I say waving it off.

He lets out a long breath, irritated. He doesn't like it when personal life interferes with business. "Ryder, I may work twenty-four-seven, but I think

I know when my son is having problems," he states.

"Problems?" It's more than that. The woman I'm falling for thinks of me as a fuck, and I'm too big of a pussy to tell her otherwise.

"Are you in trouble?" he asks, coming to sit down in the seat Kelly had occupied. I shake my head. "Then what is it?"

"I said nothing."

"Money? Do you need money?"

I laugh, but it holds no humor. "No." I have plenty of that.

His brows pull together. "Ryder, you have to tell me …" He stops mid-sentence. His brows rise to his hairline, and his green eyes widen.

"What?" I ask as he looks at me as if I've grown two heads.

"It's a woman," he states, and I don't deny it. I'm not like Ashlyn. I can't deny what I know I feel. And I have feelings for her. "Who is she?" he asks.

"I'd rather not say," I tell him, shaking my head. I'm not ashamed of Ashlyn. I'm keeping her a secret to protect her. My mother would have a fucking cow, and my father would be against it for his own reasons.

He runs a hand through his hair. "Is she pregnant?"

"What?" I start to shake my head but stop. Is she pregnant? I mean I guess she could be; we haven't used protection since the first night we had sex.

"Ryder"—he hangs his head—"you have to be careful. Women will take advantage—"

"She's not like that," I interrupt him. "And no, she's not pregnant." As far as we know, but I'd rather not let him think that's a possibility.

He sighs as if relieved. "I just don't want you to be like …" He pauses as if to find the right word, and my jaw tightens.

"Like you," I finish his sentence. "You don't want me to knock up someone and get stuck in a loveless marriage." When my mother had me, my father was twenty-three. They never speak of it, but we all know why they got married.

"That's not what I was gonna say," he says, his tone matching mine. He didn't correct me about the loveless marriage, though. "I don't regret having kids."

“Just marrying Mom.”

“Not everything is black and white,” he snaps.

“Then explain it to me,” I demand. My father and I have never had this talk. The one where he tells me that he knocked my mother up and he married her three weeks after they found out I was on the way.

“I …” He sighs heavily. “It’s not that I don’t love your mother.”

“Then what is it?” I ask, really wanting to understand. He goes to open his mouth, but I add, “I love my job, Father. I love this company. And I have worked my ass off to prove to you that, when you decide I’m ready, I’ll do everything in my power to make you proud of me. But I want more,” I say, and his brows pull together. I realize I’m giving him the same speech that Ashlyn gave me. “I want more than a view of Manhattan,” I add. “I want a wife and kids.” His lips lift at the corners as if a daughter-in-law and grandchildren would make him happy, but I can’t tell if it’s real or not. He’s harder to read than my mother is. “And I’m sorry, but I’m not willing to sacrifice one for the other. There’s nothing wrong with wanting it all,” I tell him. Selfish. I want to be selfish.

He nods once. “I don’t pretend to be the best role model, Ryder. I wasn’t always there for you. But that doesn’t mean that I regret my life.” He turns to look out over Manhattan. The city he has slowly taken over as his own. His pride and joy. I wonder at what point in his life that became more important than any living being.

“You did the best you could,” I tell him, dropping my eyes to the conference table.

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “I didn’t. I wasn’t there for you, and I wasn’t there for your sister.” He places his hand on my shoulder. “I built this company into something, that you would one day want to run, in hopes to spend every day with you working beside me.” I frown. “I knew that Becca wouldn’t want anything to do with it. And your mother, well, she has her own life. And I’m okay with that.”

I cringe at his words. How can you be with someone who doesn’t want to spend time with you? “Then why are you married?” I ask the question that has always been in the back of my mind. Too afraid to ask.

“Because I took a vow.”

I snort. “It holds no value if the words are meaningless.”

“I loved your mother. I still do.” He swallows, correcting his words. “But people change over time.”

“Could you imagine your life without Mom?” It’s a question that no son should ever ask his father. But nothing is ordinary about our father-son relationship.

He stares at me, his hand still on my shoulder and his face unreadable. “Your mother has been a constant in my life for thirty years.”

“And?” I ask when he doesn’t say anything else.

“And no one lives forever, Ryder.”

His words are like a knife to my chest. *No one lives forever*. It reminds me of what Ashlyn told me about Romeo and Juliet. How a love so consuming can make you irrational. *I want to love someone who can’t breathe if I were to die,* Ashlyn had said.

“So you stay married until one of you dies? Then what?” I ask through gritted teeth. “Move on to the next?”

“Love is a weakness,” he says softly. “A weakness that costs you more than any amount of money can fix.” He removes his hand from my shoulder and stands. He buttons the single button to his gray suit jacket as he stares down at me. “I’m not gonna tell you not to fall in love, Ryder. Because maybe your love will be better than mine is. I’m not gonna tell you to pick this job over love either. But what I am going to tell you is this. Make sure that what you feel is love. Because in the end, it’s gonna cost you something. Your dignity. Your pride. Or maybe it’ll be something as simple as thirty years of your life.” I cringe that he can talk so easily about wasting more than half his life. “I may not have been there for every sports game or your daily life, but I have taught you that everything has a price. You just have to make sure it’s worth the cost.” Then he turns around and walks out, leaving me sitting alone looking out the floor-to-ceiling windows of Manhattan.

I’m not sure what I expected that conversation to accomplish, but finding out the truth about him and my mother didn’t help the knot in my stomach.

He confirmed everything that Ashlyn said to me last night. How ordinary love is to some people. How a few words and a piece of paper can mean nothing at all.

I've never told a woman that I love her because I never have. Well, I have to my sister, but I would lay my life down for hers.

But Ashlyn is different. For five years now, I've been married to this job. And I blame it on my parents. I saw how distant they were, and I never wanted that. I didn't want a woman who would be more wrapped up in her social life than in me. I guess, in a way, I'm kind of selfish too.

I look down at my watch and see it's a quarter till noon. I shove my chair back and stand, heading toward the door. I have somewhere to be.

ASHLYN

I spent half of my first day at Talia's filling out paperwork. I also sat through an hour class taught by a man named Thomas, who I remember from sitting behind the front desk the day of my interview. He shows me around the building and gives me a little backstory on the gallery.

"The owner lives in Canada," he informs me.

I nod. "What made them want to open a gallery in New York?"

"Their daughter was a painter," he says. "She died when she was seventeen."

"Oh God, that's awful."

He nods softly. "I believe it was cancer. Her dream was to come to New York and become an artist. She wanted to have her paintings showcased all over the world, but she wanted her lifelong dream to start in New York. The family had traveled here for her cancer treatments, and somehow, something went wrong, and she passed, with the fault to the hospital. The parents sued and won then bought this gallery in her name."

"That's horrible." I don't know what else to say.

"That was over fifty years ago," he states. "Her parents have since passed, and I believe they handed it down to another relative."

"Do they come here often?"

He shakes his head. “I’ve never met them.”

“How long have you worked here?”

“Five years.”

The front doors open as we make our way back to the desk in the front lobby, my black heels clapping on the floor. I smile in surprise when I see Ryder walk in. He wears the same black dress slacks and white button up shirt that he had on earlier. Only he’s ditched his jacket, and his sleeves are rolled up.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he says, smiling as he pushes his aviators up into his messy yet styled to perfection hair.

“You know that man?” Thomas asks, looking him up and down.

“Ryder,” I say excitedly.

“Mmmmmhmmm,” Thomas says in approval. “That man can *ride* me anytime.”

I ignore him. “What are you doing here?” I ask as he reaches us. He wraps his right arm around my stomach as his other hand is behind his back. He pulls me to him, and I look up at him with a smile on my face. Glad he’s in a better mood than he was this morning when he dropped me off. “Thought I wasn’t gonna see you until after work?”

“I thought I’d surprise you for lunch.”

My eyes light up. “I love surprises.”

“Good.” He lets go of me and brings his left hand around to the front, and I squeal like a schoolgirl when he produces red roses.

I lean forward and sniff them. “Smells so good.” I take them from him. “Thank you,” I say.

He finally looks over at Thomas and reaches out his hand. “Ryder O’Kane,” he says.

Thomas actually giggles. “I know who you are, Mr. O’Kane. Nice to meet you.”

Ryder looks back at me. “Hungry?”

“Starving.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

RYDER

I couldn’t spend another minute at the office without seeing her. My father would call that weakness; I call it an obsession.

We didn’t even make it to lunch. As soon as we got into my Escalade, we were all over one another. If Milton hadn’t been driving, I would have done her right then and there, but he was, so we decided to go back to my apartment. We weren’t even through my front door, and she already had my pants unbuttoned and my shirt ripped open.

My phone rang loudly in the pocket of my slacks the entire time I fucked her in my bed.

An hour later, I had to find a new shirt to wear since she ripped the buttons off my other one. I watch her slide her skirt up and over her legs and then step into her black heels. She smiles at me as she picks her bra up off the floor.

“I’m gonna make us some coffee,” she says before she walks out.

I hurry to get dressed and make my way to the kitchen. I’m so tired. I just wanna go back to bed with her and skip the second half of work. I smile. “You keep spoiling me like this, and I’ll have you moved in.”

She tenses at my words and turns, giving me her back. I walk over to her. I put my hands on her hips and spin her around to face me. Reaching up, I push some blond strands behind her ear. I’ve decided this isn’t going to happen. I’m not gonna let her shut me out. I’m not gonna allow her to hide inside her head. She’s gonna face what is happening here.

She looks up at me through long dark lashes. Her lipstick is wore off from my lips on hers, and her makeup is smeared from pushing her face down into the sheets, but she still looks just as beautiful. “Don’t say things like that,” she whispers.

“Like what?” I ask, wanting her to tell me what she’s so afraid of. Is it just me?

She swallows. “Like this isn’t temporary.”

“What if I said it wasn’t?”

She sighs, her chest rising and falling slowly. She still has the top three buttons of her shirt undone, and I can see the tops of her breasts. I refrain from running my tongue over them. “This is not what we agreed to.” She decides to dodge my question.

“It’s not, but the situation has changed.” *People change*, my father had said. She is changing me. Am I the one to change her?

“Ryder—”

“Tell me it hasn’t,” I interrupt her. “Tell me that you only see me as a friend.” It’s a gamble. I know we’re moving fast, and I’m pushing it, but I’ve never been one to take things slow. I jump in head first and give it my all.

She swallows nervously as her bright blue eyes look up at me. They search mine, and I grab her hand. I bring it to my lips and gently kiss it. “Look at me and tell me that you look at me the same way you did that night on the beach. When all you wanted was one night?”

She draws in a long breath. “You know that would be a lie.” Her words are barely above a whisper.

“Then why won’t you just let go, sweetheart?” My hands cup her face, and I lean into her. “I’m right here,” I say against her lips. “I promise I’m not going anywhere.”

“They’re just words,” she tells me.

I frown, and she explains. “Anyone can tell you what you want to hear.”

“You think that’s what I’m doing?” What would I have to gain from lying to her? I’ve never had to lie to get what I want, and I’m not about to start now.

“Yes.” I arch my brow. “No.” She sighs. “I don’t know,” she says honestly, and I try not to smile. She looks so cute confused.

I press my body into hers, my cell ringing in my pocket. “How about this? I’ll show you.”

“Those are big words to keep,”

“I’m up for the challenge.” I smile, but she doesn’t return it. I take a deep breath and release it. “I’m not Bradley.”

She stiffens at my words, and I just wanna shake and tell her to stop doing that. “What does he have to do with this?”

“Everything,” I state. “You’re comparing everything we do to you and him. I’m not like him.”

“I know,” she growls, her anger rising.

“I’m not gonna treat you like he does.”

Her eyes narrow on me. “What does that mean?”

“You told your mother this morning that I was just like him. That I mean nothing to you.” I can’t hide it. How much that statement hurt me.

She sighs and pulls away from me. “Is that why you acted funny this morning?” I don’t answer. I don’t need to. “What was I supposed to say?”

“The truth.”

“And what is that?” she snaps.

“That I mean something to you,” I snap back. “God, why is it so fucking hard for you admit that you feel something for me?” I demand.

“Because I don’t want you to have that power,” she yells.

I stand there and stare down at her. Her eyes widen for the briefest moment as she realizes what she just said, but I refrain from smiling. So I say, “It would only be fair because you have that power over me.”

“Ryder,” she whispers my name.

I place my hand on her face, and I can feel her body trembling. “I’m not lying.” I shake my head once. “I would gain nothing from lying to you, sweetheart. You have so much power over me it’s not even funny,” I admit. “You’re all I think about. You’re my first thought when I wake up and the last thought when I go to sleep. Hell, I dream about you.”

“Stop.” She chokes on the word.

“No,” I say, and she swallows as her big blue eyes search mine. “I’m not gonna stop telling you how I feel. And I’m not gonna stop trying to get you to do the same.”

“I don’t wanna get hurt,” she says softly.

“I’m not gonna hurt you,” I say.

“You can’t promise that.”

“I can promise you that no other woman has made me feel what you do,” I say truthfully, and a single tear runs down her face. I wipe it away with my thumb. “It’s okay to be scared, Ashlyn. But it’s not okay to run away before we even have a chance.”

“A chance at what?” she asks.

“At being the exception.”

***

We sit in the back of the Escalade on the way back to work. Ashlyn sits next to me with her hand in mine on my lap as she looks out her window like she did this morning. But this time, it’s different. This time, we’ve both faced a fear, and now, we know where we both stand. Together.

Her phone dings, and she picks it up off her lap. She smiles as she reads a message. “Who is it?” I ask.

She looks up at me, now smiling. “It’s Thomas,”

I frown. “Who is Thomas? And should I be worried?”

She laughs. “No. I should be more worried than you.” My frown deepens, and her smile widens. “Oh,” I say with a laugh. “What does he want?”

“He asked if I was still out with the King of New York.”

I smile. “King?”

She nods. “I guess in his circle, you, Mr. Ryder O’Kane, are known as the King.”

“I like that.” I lean in and kiss her on her lips. “Wanna be my queen?”

She arches a brow. “Want me to rule your imaginary kingdom?”

“Hey now, don’t discredit my people.”

She laughs, and I smile at the sound. “I guess I can take the position. But I want a crown.”

I smile. “I would expect nothing less.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

RYDER

The rest of the week went by fast. I spent Thursday out of town on business, and Ashlyn went back to staying at her own apartment. *I hated it!*

Friday was hell at the office. Like any other given day, shit wasn't going right, and my dad was on my ass. So when I did finally make it home, I text Ashlyn to meet me up at my apartment. We spent the night in my bed doing nothing but each other.

I wake up Saturday morning with the sun shining in my room. I look to see Ashlyn is gone and roll over to answer my phone as it blares. I press ignore.

I groan loudly when I hear my phone ringing again. It goes off non-stop, and I would really like to smash it with a hammer just for some peace and quiet for a few hours.

"Hello?" I answer roughly, not bothering to look at the caller ID. My eyes are still trying to adjust to the light.

"Well, if it isn't my long-lost son," my mother says dryly.

"Hello, Mother," I say, running my hand down my face. I really wish I could cancel this party and just spend the evening in bed with Ashlyn. Sex can be so relaxing.

"Are you back in town?"

"Yes, I got back yesterday." I had to run to Chicago yesterday. I was only there for three hours.

She sighs. "Well, if you answered my calls, then I would know where you are at."

"I'm not five, Mother. You don't need to know my every move."

"True. But that doesn't mean you have to ignore me." I sigh, and she goes on. "I spoke to Debra earlier today, and she said that you didn't invite

Vicki to the party tonight."

Here we go again. Debra is one of her friends, and Vicki is Debra's daughter.

"It must have slipped my mind," I lie.

"I figured so. I called her myself earlier and invited her."

Fuck! "That was very thoughtful of you," I say through gritted teeth.

"I just want you to have a great party. You only turn twenty-nine once." She pretends to care. "Well, I must be going. I have to finish getting ready; some girlfriends and I are getting together tonight for our book club."

Reading? Ashlyn loves to read. "Mom, have you read *Romeo and Juliet*?"

She's silent on the other end, probably wondering what I'm up to. I never ask her questions because I'm usually too busy deflecting hers. Finally, she answers. "Of course."

"What did you think of it?"

She sighs as if answering is going to put her out. "I found it to be a tragedy. Letting someone consume you to the point you lose yourself is just idiotic."

Of course, she does. When I spoke to my father, I actually felt a small bit of pity for my mother. That she married a man who didn't fully love her like she should be, but now, I feel sorry for my father because it turns out she doesn't love him like he should be either. "Wow, Mom, tell me how you really feel." Ashlyn found it romantic and said that true love should make you lose yourself. *You don't really know who you are until you lose yourself.* I like Ashlyn's opinion better.

"I said I read it. I didn't say I liked it," she says, and I can hear her rolling her eyes.

I hang up, and my hand drops to the bed beside my head. I let out a long sigh before I roll over onto my stomach and bury my face into the comforter. A quick nap can't hurt. I plan to get drunk tonight; it's my birthday party, after all.

My phone dings again, and I almost think about ignoring it, but I find myself reaching out for it. I smile when I see it's a text from Ashlyn.

Ashlyn: *I just had a man give me a full body massage. You need to up your game.*

What the fuck …? Then it hits me, and I laugh.

Me: *I'll remember that next time I see you. I'll make sure to bring the lotion.*

Ashlyn: *I prefer oil.*

Me: *So demanding.*

Ashlyn: *No, I just know what I like.*

I go to respond, but she does before I can.

Ashlyn: *If I didn't tell you already, thanks for my spa day. I am being pampered, and they are serving me alcohol. I'll make sure to return the favor tonight.*

I look at her message with a smile and decide I need to get out of bed and do some shopping today.

ASHLYN

"Ash, you ready?"

"Almost," I call out as Becca opens my bedroom door. I spoke to Ryder earlier after Milton had picked Becca and me up at the spa; he said he would just meet us at the party tonight.

"Damn, girl. You look hot," she says as she enters my room.

I turn to face her and smile. "Look at you! Sexy," I say as she twirls around. She wears an off-white halter dress. She has her dark hair in big

curls with her layered bangs pulled up in a silver clip.

“Do you think it’s too much?” she asks.

“What? Not at all. It’s perfect,” I say honestly. She’s like a whole new person. She’s always laughing. Smiling. I think even she has realized how much Conner brought her down.

She giggles. “Thank you.” Her phone dings, and she pulls it out of her bag. She reads it with a smile on her face.

“Is that Jaycent?” I ask being the nosy friend.

“Maybe,” she says, placing the phone to her chest. “We’d better get going,” she says, changing the subject.

I walk over to my nightstand and grab Ryder’s present out of the top drawer and place it in my clutch. “I’m ready.”

We make our way down to the front door, and a black Escalade is waiting for us curbside. “Milton?” I ask Becca with a smile.

“No, this is Rohnny. He’s worked for my family for as long as I can remember.”

A man with jet-black curly hair gets out and makes his way around to the back of the door. He smiles brightly at us, making his skin wrinkle around his brown eyes. “Good evening, ladies.”

Becca introduces me to the man named Rohnny and then he asks. “Who is ready to party?” He shakes his hips back and forth with a smile.

“I am,” I say excitedly. I’ve actually been looking forward to this since Ryder asked me. I wanna have some shots. Maybe dance and just enjoy myself. I’m not the kind of girl who likes to stay cooped up at home. I like to get out, meet new people, and just have fun. Today has been the best day. I had a little man by the name of Ricco massage my entire body. I then had a woman by the name of Sileen put mud on my face while another woman did my nails and another did my toes. I sat in a sauna and sweated all the toxins out and had my hair blow-dried along with my makeup done. All I had to do was come home and get dressed.

As Rohnny drives us away from the city, I turn to Becca. “Where is the party at?” Like everything else, I never asked. I just assumed it would be at a club. She told me to wear clubwear, after all.

“It’s on Ryder’s boat.”

I was not expecting that. “A boat?” I ask surprised.

“Yes. It was his present to himself from himself.” She rolls her eyes. “Ryder is all about luxury things. He’s like my parents.”

I try not to cringe at how she says that. I wanna say he’s not like them. That he shows compassion and that he has love to give, but I don’t. Instead, I say, “Well, now I feel stupid for what I got him.”

She turns to look at me a shy smile on her face. “He’ll love it.”

“That sounded more like a question than a statement,” I say, laughing.

“It was a statement,” she assures me, and I brush it off. If he doesn’t like it, then oh well. What do you buy a man who buys himself a boat? The answer—something you can afford.

“Just what are we gonna do on this boat? I hate to be such a girl, but if we take it on the water, the wind will totally destroy my hair.”

Becca and Rohnny laugh. “I’m serious. Genice spent a lot of time on it today,” I say, reaching up and touching the bump she gave me. I opted for the straight look, but she teased it at the crown and put this awesome product in it that made it actually stay. I have quite a bit of hair; it’s long and thick, so usually, it falls after twenty minutes. It’s been going strong for three hours now.

“Trust me; it will be okay,” Becca assures me as she pats my leg.

Thirty minutes later, we pull up to the Westside Docks, and the Escalade comes to a stop. “Here we are, ladies.” Rohnny gets out of the SUV and opens the door for us.

“Thank you,” we both say as he closes the door behind us.

“You’re welcome. Have fun, and I’ll be back in the morning.”

“Morning?” I ask, looking at her. “I didn’t know we were staying the night. Where are we gonna sleep?” I didn’t bring an overnight bag.

“On the boat,” she says in her duh voice.

I follow Becca because I don’t have a freaking clue where we’re going.

We make our way down the dock and turn right at the end. I look in awe at all the boats parked in the slips. She comes to a stop in front of a boat and starts to walk up the wooden ramp.

“Whoa,” I say, looking up at the big massive yacht. “Is this Ryder’s *boat*?” I’m pretty sure that’s what she had called this massive thing.

“Yep,” she responds with laughter. “I told you. He likes the luxury things.”

“Becca, this is a yacht,” I say in awe, and she laughs at me as she continues to leave me behind and walks up the wooden ramp.

I look at the white and black yacht. It looks to be three stories, maybe four. Its front comes to a sharp point, and it reminds me of something you would see in a James Bond movie; he would be driving while he wines and dines his conquests. Its windows are narrow but long. They’re as black as the boat as if he’s had them tinted. There’s a couple of big satellites on the top and a platform that if I had to guess would be for a helicopter.

I look back at the wooden walkway and realize Becca is no longer on it. Walking up to it, I hang onto the rope for support, making sure I don’t fall down or stumble off the side of my heels and fall into the water. That would be one way to enter a party. Wet and embarrassed.

A crowd of people stand at the top of the wooden walkway. The two men look me up and down, and the three women don’t give me the time of day. I sigh. I’m gonna be spending a lot of time on my own at this party. I’m sure Becca will be hiding out with Jaycent, so Ryder won’t see them, and Ryder will be with his guests, entertaining them.

I look to the right and then to the left. I decide to go to the back of the boat. Looks like fewer people.

I look down at the light wooden deck. My black heels clap as I come up to the back railing. I look down at the water. I’m not sure if Ryder plans to take this baby out for a spin or if we’re just gonna party while docked, but either way, I just wanna watch the water for now. It’s calm. So calm that it looks like blue glass. The sun is still up, and I look out to the right and see nothing but water. I wonder what it would be like to look around and be completely surrounded by the ocean. Leave the land behind.

“You look too beautiful to be all alone.”

I smile as I hear that familiar voice coming up behind me. I turn around and see Ryder standing a couple of feet from me dressed in white slacks and

a black button up. His sleeves are rolled up to his elbows, and a skinny black tie is around his neck. I smile because he looks just like the water; beautiful and deadly. *He's dangerous.* He's exactly the kind of guy you can't help but fall for even though you know you shouldn't. It's only been three weeks, and I'm already starting to drown. "You look too handsome to be alone," I counter.

His lips pull back into a smirk as he places his hands in his front pockets and I clench my thighs together. Thankfully, I actually wore panties tonight. "I say we stick together then."

"I could be persuaded."

He takes the steps, closing the space. "I'll do whatever it takes," he says as he looks me up and down. The heat in his eyes sends a chill up my spine. His eyes land on mine, and he clears his throat. "All joking aside, you look gorgeous," he says seriously.

Gorgeous? Why does he say that word so smooth? His deep voice makes that word sound better than any word should. "Thank you." I smile at him. "How did you know where to find me?" I ask, trying to calm my nerves. He makes my body break out in goose bumps and my sex throb when he's this close to me.

"Because you stand out. How could I miss you?" I feel a blush creep up my cheeks, and I try to change the subject.

I nod my head. "So you bought yourself a yacht?"

His eyes never leave mine. "It seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Buyer's remorse?" I ask, arching an eyebrow. "I once bought a snake and had buyer's remorse," I tell him.

"Something like that." He laughs. "A snake, huh? I don't see you being the type to own a pet snake."

I shrug. "Thought it was a good idea at the time," I repeat his words to him.

He chuckles. "Did it end up eating another pet of yours?"

I shake my head. "No, he was some kind of snake magician, and no matter what I did, he always escaped his cage. The time my mother went to bed only to find he had curled up under her pillow, Fangs had to go."

“Fangs?” he asks with a smile.

“I was into vampires.”

“It all makes sense now.” He smiles, and I return it. “What about men?”

“What about them?”

“Have any regrets in that department?” he asks.

I give him a flirty smile. “Not yet.” *But I see it coming.*

He laughs, removing one hand from his pocket and runs it through his thick, messy hair.

“Mr. O’Kane.” A man dressed in a black suit and tie comes up behind him with a tray of drinks. Ryder grabs two and thanks him. He turns to face me and offers me one of the flutes of bubbly.

“Thank you.” I take a sip as he watches me intently. “Well, hopefully, I won’t regret my present I got you.”

He smiles at that. “Does it consist of you naked in my bed downstairs after everyone has left?”

I laugh softly. “Not quite. But that can be arranged.” It won’t take much.

“That’s all I need.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

RYDER

She looks amazing. The black cocktail dress shows off her body but not too much. She has bright red heels on just like Tuesday night, and I can't wait to get her undressed. "How about we forget about the party and go take care of that now?" I suggest.

"Not so fast." She shakes her head. "You wouldn't wanna disappear and disappoint your guests."

I take a step closer to her, closing the space. I take my free hand that isn't holding a champagne flute and place it on her soft skin. "The only guest I care to see is right in front of me," I admit.

"Still feeding me lines, I see. Even after I already gave it up," she teases.

"You ever think that maybe they're not lines?" I ask.

The teasing smile drops off her face, and she looks up at me. Her blue eyes search mine, and for the life of me, I can't understand why she doesn't believe me. I want more! I wanna be selfish too.

She's the one making all these stupid rules; I couldn't care less about them. I want her. All of her. She has consumed me. Filled my head with all these thoughts I've never had before, yet here she is, calling all the shots. I should be lost. Confused. But I'm not. I've never been more sure.

"Ryder. We can't …"

"Shh," I say, lowering my lips to hers. "I want my birthday kiss."

She presses her lips to mine softly. I taste the sweetness of the champagne on her lips along with the taste of strawberries from her lipstick. She opens her mouth wider for me to deepen the kiss.

"Ryder! There you are."

She pulls away from me quickly, licking her lips. My back tenses as I recognize the voice. *Vicki!* Before I can even turn around to tell her to fuck

off, a hand squeezes my ass. I jump as an awkward laugh comes out of me.

"Vicki!" I say in a high-pitch voice. "What are you doing here?" I ask stupidly.

"You invited me, silly." She comes up beside me and notices Ashlyn standing in front of me. "Oh. Hello," she says as she looks her up and down.

Ashlyn smiles, and I can't tell if it's fake or real. She places her glass in her left hand and reaches out her right. "Hello. I'm Ashlyn."

Vicki smiles back, but I can tell it's all fake. "Vicki," she replies, sticking her nose up in the air. "What are you doing out here, Ryder?"

I clear my throat. "I was talking to Ashlyn."

"About what?" she asks as if she deserves to know.

I turn to fully face her. "I don't see how that is any of your business," I say, and she gasps like I struck her. "Now …" I'm about to tell her to leave us, but Ashlyn interrupts us.

"It's okay, Ryder," Ashlyn says, waving it off. "We can talk work later." She winks at Vicki. "He's all yours." Then walks past me with that smile that I still can't decide is real or fake.

"Are you drunk, Ryder?" Vicki demands.

I let out a long sigh as I tip the champagne flute back and down the entire glass. "Not yet," I say with a tight smile. I look over to see Ashlyn walking away, her ass swaying in that tight black dress, and all thoughts go to her. She is the one I wanted to spend this evening with. She is the reason I wanted to cancel this party for. Her. And that's who I'm going to spend the night with. "Ashlyn, wait," I call out, and she stops. I look back at Vicki. "I'm gonna show Ashlyn around." And with that, I walk off toward her.

"You don't have to do that," Ashlyn whispers as I place my hand on her lower back. I feel her tense, and I frown.

"I did," I say, pressing her forward. "I'm gonna show you the boat."

"Yacht." She corrects me, and I feel her body relax. "I'd hate to see what you guys call an actual boat," she says with a chuckle.

"Mr. O'Kane."

I turn around, about to snap at whoever is interrupting us, but then smile when I see it's my captain. "Matthew." I turn to Ashlyn. "Ashlyn, this is the captain, Matthew. Matthew, this is Ashlyn."

"Nice to meet you," he says as he shakes her hand. She does the same. He places his attention on me. "Are you ready, sir?"

I nod, and he nods back before he turns and walks off. "What was that about?" she asks.

"We're about to take off."

Her eyes widen, and she smiles. "We're taking it out?"

"Of course." I wrap my arm around her shoulders. "Let me show you around."

I show her around my boat, avoiding my bedroom for a reason. If I take her in there right now, I'll have her bent over my bed with her dress shoved up around her waist, and that will have to wait until later.

"What's her name?" she asks as we stand on the bridge of the boat. She places her hands on the helm as she looks out the glass to the bow.

"She doesn't have one yet."

She looks over at me and frowns. "Isn't it bad luck not to name your boat?'

"I'm not superstitious," I tell her.

"Guess that's a good thing. I have to ask. Is there a spot for a helicopter on here?"

I nod. "Not sure I'll ever use that, though."

"Why did you buy a yacht?" she asks frowning. "Do you like to spend a lot of time on the ocean?"

I nod. "I would love to have a house on the ocean. It would be convenient if my yacht was docked right there." She gives me a slow and sexy smile. "What?" I ask, wondering what she is thinking.

"That's all I could think about while in Panama City. I wanna live on the ocean too." She looks back out to the bow. "I can imagine waking up and walking outside to drink my coffee on the deck as I listen to the waves and inhale the fresh air." She closes her eyes and smiles. "It's always been a dream of mine."

ASHLYN

Ryder and I walk out onto the bridge, and a guy comes up to him and starts a conversation about his yacht. I look around and spot Jaycent and Becca. I start to walk toward them, giving Ryder time alone to talk with his friend. As I approach them, they are laughing. Becca clears her throat when she sees me coming.

"What is up with you two?"

"Nothing …" Jaycent answers.

He has to know that I know about them. Right? I arch an eyebrow at him as he just stares at me.

Jaycent sighs heavily, and then he looks quickly behind me. I turn to see Ryder patting the guy on the shoulder and then turn, heading straight for us. So I drop it for now. "Hey guys," he says as he comes up to us. He drapes his arm over my shoulders.

I shake him off, confused on what to think. I'm to the point where there's no going back. I've let this go too far, and now, it's either sink or swim. The problem is, which one is the right one?

"Everything all right?" Ryder asks me.

I just nod. Jaycent looks away as if he didn't just see his friend get turned down. "We're gonna go find …" He can't even think of a name to say as he grabs Becca's hand and then yanks her away, leaving Ryder and me alone.

"I'm sorry about that, babe."

I take a deep breath and look up at him. His dark green eyes search mine, and he reaches out, wrapping his hand around my waist. He pulls me tight to him, and I melt like I have every other time he has touched me. Or even smiled at me.

I wrap my arms around his neck and press my lips to his, and he takes my breath away as he pulls me into him. I kiss him deeply, passionately, like at any moment he's gonna be ripped from me. And I realize I'll never be the same.

I pull away before it goes too far in front of all his friends. He lets out a long sigh as I take a deep breath. He places his forehead against mine, and I

smile, knowing I affect him the same as he does me. I'm not alone when it comes to my feelings, and he hasn't been secretive about his. "No need to apologize, Ryder." I pause to take another long breath. "I'm not one of these girls who doesn't want you talking to your friends. This is your party. You should be mingling."

"What if I told you all day I dreaded this party?" he whispers, his forehead still pressed to mine.

"Why would you do that?" My smile grows. I wanna be with him right now. I want it to just be the two of us.

He pulls his forehead away from mine and looks down at me, running his right hand through my hair. "Because I just wanted to spend tonight with you."

"I'm here."

"But we're not alone."

I feel heat run up my spine from his words, and I have to agree with him. I wish we were alone too.

My phone starts to ring, and I pull away from him, wondering who would be calling me. "Hold that thought," I say, digging into my clutch. I answer it when I see it's Bradley. "Hello?" I ask, taking another step away from him.

"Hey, princess," he says really loud. I jerk the phone from my ear as I laugh.

"Are you drunk dialing me?" I ask. It's only seven o'clock here. It's too early for him to be drunk in Seattle.

I hear a lot of background noise, which tells me he's out at the bar. "Hang on," he calls out.

I lean my back up against the side of the railing. "Okay, you there?"

"Yep," I say looking down at my heels.

"Oh God, Princess," he breathes, and I know that sound. He's drunk and horny. "I miss you."

I smile. "I miss you too," I say, truly meaning it. He and I were as close as Becca and I are. He's been my second best friend for three years now.

“No,” he says softly. “I mean I really miss you.” I hear him cough and then I hear a few voices before it gets quiet again. “You need to come home.”

I frown. “I am home, Bradley. New York is my home now,” I tell him softly. “I do miss you, though.”

There’s a long silence on his end of the phone to the point I think I lost him. I check my phone and see that the call is still active. “Bradley?”

“Yeah!” he slurs. “I’m here,” he says quickly. “I, uh, gotta go, princess. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Then before I can even say a word, he hangs up.

I place my phone back in my clutch, and when I look up, Ryder is standing in front of me. A full glass of champagne for me. “Thank you,” I say, taking it from him.

I go to take a sip but pause as I get a good look at him. His green eyes are narrowed, and his defined jaw tight. He places both of his hands in the front pockets of his white slacks and pulls his shoulders back. “What’s wrong?” I ask. Ryder is the type of man who wears his emotions on his face. Some men can stare at you blankly while they imagine running you over with a car; Ryder is not one of those men. If he’s mad, you know it.

His eyes look down at my clutch for a few long seconds and then back up to me. He gives me a small smile. “I was wondering about my birthday present?” he asks. “When can I receive that?” His voice is a little tighter than earlier, but he obviously doesn’t wanna talk about it, and I don’t wanna push it and ruin his birthday party.

I smile and decide to play with him. Try and lighten his mood. “Well, I could drop to my knees for you right now and whip it out, but if I suck you off right here, then you may have someone who decides to record that shit and post it on the internet. You don’t wanna be associated with a sex tape,” I say seriously.

He nods quickly, his face already starting to loosen up. “I will gladly take those chances.” He pulls his hands out of his pockets and reaches down like he’s gonna unbutton his pants, and I slap his hand away. We both laugh.

“All joking aside.” I dig into my clutch and give him the white envelope.

He takes it from me and smiles. “Is it a coupon book?” he asks excitedly.

“A coupon book?”

“You know. One of those coupon books that you make up, and it has blowjobs, sex, and massages. I give you a coupon when I wanna cash it in.”

I shake my head as I smile. He just laughs, all madness gone, and opens it up. He pulls out two tickets to the New York Nicks game next weekend. “You got me tickets to the game,” he says with a smile.

“Yes. I saw you had some Nick’s memorabilia in your apartment and your sister said that you loved them. So I thought I would get you tickets.”

He holds them up between us. “We’re going to the game,” he states.

I shake my head. “Oh no, my intention wasn’t for you to bring me. I want you to take whoever you want.” I won’t tell him I’m excited he wants to take me.

He steps up to me, pinning my back to the railing. He lifts his free hand and runs his knuckles down the side of my cheek. “There’s no one else I want to go with.” Then he kisses me. A soft and sensual kiss.

My hands come up and wrap around his neck, careful not to spill my drink down his back. I deepen the kiss as he pushes his hard erection into my lower waist, and I instantly wish we were alone.

“I wanna show you below,” he whispers against my lips when he pulls away.

I nod. “Okay.”

He leads me away from the people and walks me through the inside of the yacht. The carpet is white, and the furniture is white leather. It’s just as fancy as it looks from the outside. It has chandeliers that hang from the ceiling, and he walks down a set of stairs. And then he’s taking me down a long and narrow hallway. He comes to a white door, and he opens it.

I gasp as I walk through it. He follows behind me and shuts the door. “God, this place is beautiful,” I say, looking around the master suite. The wooden floors are darker brown than what the floors outside have. The walls are dark brown material. There are two large windows that I can see nothing but water in front of us. Ryder walks over to them and shuts them.

“I was enjoying that view,” I tell him.

He smirks. “I have a better view right in front of me.”

He stalks to me, his eyes darkening and his lips parting as he inhales sharply. I feel my insides tighten, and my pussy starts to throb as his eyes rake over my legs.

His hands touch my thighs, and I suck in a long breath. “Why do you look nervous?” he asks softly, his hands inching up higher every second.

“I’m not,” I say breathlessly.

He smiles. “Has anyone ever told you that you’re a shitty liar?”

I nod, and his smile widens. “You make me nervous,” I admit.

He lowers his head to my neck, his hands now reaching the hem of my dress and he pushes it up and over my ass. “Why is that, sweetheart? Afraid I’m gonna ruin you?”

I shiver. “No …”

“Shame.” His teeth nip at my neck, and I shiver. “What if I told you that’s my plan?”

My head falls back, and I sigh. “It’s working.”

The door to his bedroom opens, and I shove myself away from him. I yank down my dress, heart pounding, but it’s too late; the brunette walks right in as if she fucking owns the place wearing a look of pure shock on her perfect face.

“Ryder!” She shrieks his name.

“Vicki,” he says her name breathlessly, and my neck heats up with jealousy when I watch as her body physically melts hearing her name on his lips. They clearly have a past. He clears his throat, and I realize it was because of me. Our kiss that made him say her name like that. I refrain from giving her a smug smile.

“What is going on?” she asks wide-eyed, looking back and forth between the two of us.

She looks like the typical woman you would see on a yacht like this. She’s much taller than I am, runway model comes to mind. She wears white flats with a yellow halter-top sundress. She has overly large tits that I know have to be fake along with her lips. Everything else is skin and bones.

“I don’t have to explain myself to you,” he says, running his hand through his spiked hair. I can’t tell if he’s agitated or embarrassed.

“What …?” Her mouth falls open at his words as if she’s never been spoken to that way. “Why are you talking to me like this?” She looks at me. “Who is she? Why are you here with her when you invited me?”

I look at him and his jaw clenches. *Did he invite her?* She has a valid point. Why did he invite both of us? “I should go,” I say, my throat tightening as hurt and jealousy knots in my stomach.

I go to walk past them, but Ryder reaches out and grabs my arm. “You’re not going anywhere,” he growls as his eyes land on mine, and I swallow nervously at the hard look on his face.

When he realizes I’m not going to make a run for it, he lets go of me and places his attention back on her. “I didn’t invite you,” he says through gritted teeth. Her bottom lip starts to quiver. “My mother invited you, Vicki. I didn’t.” He reaches out and grabs my hand; she looks down and watches with sad eyes.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

RYDER

I think Vicki is about to storm out, but she lifts her chin. “You’re choosing her over me?”

I feel Ashlyn’s hand tighten in mine. I try and roll my tense shoulders. “Vicki …”

She snorts. “Where did you find her anyway? She doesn’t belong here.” Her voice has changed to anger.

“Excuse me?” Ashlyn snaps.

Vicki crosses her arms over her chest and looks her up and down with disgust like she did on the deck earlier. “She is not even close to your league.”

Ashlyn takes a step toward her. I pull her back. “Ashlyn.” I saw her fight Conner; she’ll kick Vicki’s ass, and no matter how much I can’t stand her, I don’t want the wrath of Debra, Vicki’s mother, on her.

Vicki’s face transforms from disgust to a look of pure satisfaction. “I thought I knew that name. You’re Becca’s friend who moved here from Seattle.” She throws her head back laughing, and it makes her fake boobs bounce. “Ryder’s mother told me all about you.” I stiffen. I forget that my mother has already met her. “She told me that you were below her daughter. How you pulled her down. Now, you’re doing the same thing to Ryder.”

Ashlyn steps forward. “Did she tell you how I’m going to kick your fucking ass?”

Vicki gasps at her choice of words. I refrain from smiling. “Are you going to allow her to speak to me with such a tone, Ryder?” She looks at me, her light brown eyes wide in disbelief. When I don’t answer, she continues. “What are you doing with this white trash, Ryder?”

“That’s it!” Ashlyn yanks her hand out of my hold and runs toward her. Vicki lifts her left leg and screams out as if Ashlyn is about to knock her ass down. And that’s exactly what she plans on doing.

I wrap my arm around her waist from behind her and pick her up off the floor as her legs kick out. I spin her around planting her feet back on the floor; her beautiful blue eyes are narrowed with anger, and her lips parted as she breathes heavily.

I turn back around and face Vicki. I walk over to her, grab her arm, and escort her out of the room. “Ryder …” She cries out my name. “Ryder, you’re hurting me.” She tries to yank her arm free, but I don’t allow it. I take her out onto the deck and then to the bridge.

“Turn the boat around,” I instruct the captain.

He looks at me confused, and I release Vicki. She rubs her arm, and she stomps her foot. “Sir?”

“Turn the fucking boat around.” Vicki is getting off my boat. Either by herself or with my help. I won’t have someone disrespecting Ashlyn. Especially someone like Vicki.

“Ryder, please don’t,” she says as she starts to cry.

I turn to face her. “Whatever you think this was, it wasn’t. And it’s never going to be. Now, until you can learn some manners, get off my fucking boat.”

I storm out of the bridge and onto the deck. Someone grabs my upper arm, and I spin around. Vicki stands there, tears running down her face. “Please, Ryder. You’re supposed to be with me.”

I lower my face to hers. “I don’t want you, Vicki. What don’t you understand about that?”

Her eyes narrow on me, and she lets out a huff. She actually stomps her foot like a child pissed she didn’t get her way. “Wait until I tell your mother about this.”

I laugh. “Go ahead and run your little fucking mouth.” She gasps as if she’s never heard that word before. “And see where it gets you.” I turn around and start to walk off. I notice people have gathered around to watch

the exchange. I raise my hands. “We’re going back to port. If you wanna get off, get off,” I say.

“I will not get off this boat.”

I come to a stop and grind my teeth just as I see my sister and Jaycent come into view. I turn around and face the woman who I’ve been trying to escape all of my life. Our mothers have been planning our weddings since we were twelve. “Your ass is getting off this boat no matter what you think.”

She lets out a scream as if I just struck her. Good lord, throwing her overboard would be easier.

ASHLYN

I pace back and forth down in Ryder’s bedroom. My arms crossed over my chest and my blood boiling in anger.

How dare she say that to me! Her words stung because they were true. I don’t care when others judge me, but she’s right to an extent. I don’t come from his world. The rich part. But I don’t need money in order to be happy. I wasn’t raised that way.

I swing around when I hear the door open. Becca comes running in. “Are you okay?” she asks, looking me over quickly. Her green eyes wide and her mouth open in surprise.

“Why would you ask me that?” I ask, trying to loosen my shoulders. I hate that her mother says I’m pulling her down. I’ve done nothing but be there for her. Becca is my best friend. I would never want to hurt her in any way.

She sighs. “Ry just ordered the captain to turn the boat around. He and Vicki are up there yelling at each other this very second in front of everyone.”

“Shit!” I hiss. “I don’t want him to ruin his birthday party,” I say more to myself than her. “I need to stop him.” I’m not this woman. I don’t allow myself to get attached to a man and be the girl who starts drama. No matter how much I feel for him, this is going too far.

“He’s already made up his mind, Ashlyn,” she tells me softly. “When Ry makes up his mind, there’s no changing it.”

I sigh as I look at her. Her eyes have softened as if she’s pitying me. I swallow. “I’m sorry, Becca.”

She frowns. “For what …?”

The bedroom door opening cuts off whatever she was about to say. Ryder enters just as he had exited. Jaw tight and eyes narrowed. “Becca, can you leave us.” He makes it sound like she has an option, but we both know she doesn’t.

She walks over to me, gives me a hug, and then walks out, leaving us alone.

We stand silently, and I run a hand through my hair, not caring that Genice spent over an hour fixing it at the salon today. “Ryder, I’m so sorry.”

He raises his hand to me. “Don’t,” he growls. “Don’t fucking apologize for that fucking bitch!”

“She was right.”

“How can you fucking say that?” he demands as his nostrils flare.

I place my hands out to my side. “We’ve been kidding ourselves, Ryder.” I feel like I just stabbed myself. “This isn’t going anywhere.” The sound of my own words tighten my chest and makes it hard to take a breath. “I don’t …” I lick my lips. “I don’t belong here, and you know that.” My voice is barely audible; I’m breathing so fast.

“Stop,” he demands.

I can’t; it will be better this way. “Even your mother …”

“I don’t give a shit about what my mother thinks,” he snaps.

“But I …”

He steps up to me, and his towering frame and fire burning eyes have me shutting up. “Take off your dress.” His voice is deeper than usual, and I can feel the heat as his anger simmers.

“Ryder,” I say softly. He needs to see reason.

“Take off your dress,” he demands.

“You kicked her off the boat,” I say, trying to understand what he is thinking. “People are going to think …”

“I just told you that I don’t care what people think,” he says tightly.

“I don’t either, but I don’t want to be the woman who causes trouble for you.” How am I gonna have the strength to walk away if he won’t allow me to go? My feelings for him make me weak. And as much as I am falling for him, I don’t wanna be that woman.

He steps up to me, his chest is pressed into mine, and I can feel his heart pounding, matching mine. He lifts his right hand and slips it into my hair. “This conversation is over.” His voice still has an edge to it and eyes still hard.

I go to open my mouth, but he lifts his left hand and places a finger over my lips. “Don’t do it, sweetheart.” His voice holds warning, and I swallow.

His finger drops off my lips, his hand tightens in my hair, pulling my head back. His fingers trail down over my neck and chest before hooking into the top of my black dress. His fingernail runs along the top of my breast. “One last time.” I swallow, which is hard at the angle he’s holding my head back. “Take. Off. Your. Dress.” Each word is a growl.

He releases me, and I step back from him, breathing heavy. I look at the door. When this yacht pulls back to the docks, I should get off. I should go home and let him mingle with his friends.

I look back at him, and his eyes drill holes into mine. It’s as if he can see what I’m thinking. Without another word, he reaches down and undoes his black belt. My pussy instantly tightens. He very slowly pulls it free of the material and wraps it around his knuckles. My eyes watch it with need.

“That’s right, sweetheart. This is for you.” He unclenches his fist and the belt slowly unwinds from around his hand. My breath catches in my throat as it hangs from his hand.

I take another step back from him, wanting to make him think I’m second-guessing my intentions. But I’m not. If I wanted to leave, I would have.

I swallow and reach down to the hem of my black dress. He stands there as I lift it up and over my head. I toss it over to the other side of the room and take a deep breath. His eyes never leave mine. “Undo my pants,” he orders.

I take the ten steps, closing the space between us, and look down as I undo his button and zipper. They fall to his ankles, and he kicks off his shoes before stepping out of his white slacks.

“My shirt.” His voice is rougher. Like he is trying very hard not to shove me against the wall and fuck me to teach me a lesson. *Please, do. It’s the only way I’ll learn.*

Instead, I keep my mouth shut and do as he says. I undo the first button and then the second. His smooth and hard chest rises and falls as he takes deep breaths. His hands fist down by his sides, and although I don’t look him in the eyes, I can feel his gaze burning a hole into me.

He tosses the belt onto the bed and places his hand on my shoulder. He turns me around slowly, and his hand burns my skin so much that I whimper. He says nothing, just unclasps my bra. “Lie on the bed,” he whispers into my ear, and a shiver runs through me.

I move very slowly but make my way over to the king-size bed covered in gold and silver throw pillows. I crawl onto the thick gold comforter and lie on my back with my head at the headboard. “No,” he says, and I stop. He gestures to the end of the bed. “On your stomach,” he instructs.

I crawl to the end of the bed and place my head where my feet would normally be. I’m breathing heavy, and my heart is pounding. He walks to the foot of the bed dressed only in his boxers. His hands grip my shoulders, and he yanks me forward, my head now hanging off the bed looking down at his bare feet. “Stay like that.”

I close my eyes and bite my lip to keep myself from talking. To keep from telling him that I’m sorry. Is he mad at me? He said he wasn’t, but he has to be. I’m the reason he’s kicking Vicki off the boat. She acted all high and mighty, and I acted like … trash. I threatened to beat her ass. I was going to beat her ass. I had to have embarrassed him.

“Stop!” he says like he can read my mind. I close my eyes tighter.

The bed dips as he climbs on beside me. He grabs both of my arms and crosses them at the wrists behind my back. I whimper when I feel the cool leather wrap around them tightly. The buckle lying between my thighs. He gets off the bed, and I lift my heavy head to watch him. He walks over to a

smaller door and steps inside it. I realize that must be the closet. I strain my neck to look around, but all I see are our clothes on the floor. I have a moment of panic, wondering if he locked the door to this room. I really don't want someone walking in on us.

He comes back in, and this time, he has rope in his hands. Without a word, he takes my left ankle and pulls it towards him as he winds the rope, making a loop, and places my foot through it. He then bends down and ties it to the bed somehow. He does the same thing to the other. My legs are held wide open, my hands behind my back, and I'm panting. Every time I struggle, the rope tightens around my skin, biting into it. *I like it.*

He comes to a stop in front of me. He bends down getting eye level with me. I search his eyes as his right hand holds my face up by my chin. The left pushes my blond hair back. I'm sweating and shaking.

He doesn't say anything just strokes my face. And my heart beats wildly. After a few seconds, he let's go of my chin, and I'm straining to hold my head up. Seconds later, he's wrapping something soft and black around my eyes, taking away my sight.

I squirm helplessly, and I pant now in darkness. "Ryder …" I whimper.

"Have you ever been this helpless, Ashlyn?"

I shake my head, and it makes me dizzy. My mouth falls open as I suck in a ragged breath. My pussy is soaked, and I try to clench my thighs, but I can't because they're pulled too far apart.

"You look beautiful like this, sweetheart." His hands fist in my hair, careful not to move whatever is covering my eyes. A shiver runs through my body. "I love the way your body shakes when I take my time with you."

I wanna focus on that word again—*love*—but my lust is taking over. I pull against the leather belt around my wrists. "Please …" I choke on the word, unable to form a full sentence.

"Open your mouth," he orders as his hands tighten in my hair making my scalp tingle. I do without thought. "Wider," he growls, and I open it as wide as it will allow. Then I feel the head of his cock against my lips. I reach out further trying to pull it into my mouth, but my ankles don't allow that either. I growl in frustration.

“So hungry, my queen,” he says, and I can hear his smile of approval.

I pant, my shoulders burning from my arms tied tightly behind my back. My chest feels tight from lying on it, and my neck hurts from him holding it up by my hair. But none of that matters. What matters is the throbbing between my legs. “I wanna see you,” I say desperately

“No,” comes his simple answer. “Tonight, I decide what you see, what you hear, and what you feel.” I groan at his words. “I’m getting ready to fuck your pretty little mouth, sweetheart. And after I come and you swallow, I’m gonna gag you with your panties …” I gasp. “Then I’m gonna sit back and have a drink while I watch you squirm. I’ll touch you. Then I’m gonna hold you. I’m gonna kiss you all over until you realize that no one else fucking matters. Do you understand?”

I swallow. “Yes.”

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

RYDER

I lie on my bed in my boat as I sit propped up on my side. Ashlyn lies next to me. Asleep. The events of the night still fresh on my mind. I don't regret what I said to Vicki. What I can't let go of is the way Ashlyn looked at me after what Vicki had told her. She honestly believed her. She allowed herself to think for one second that she wasn't good enough. All I've seen this woman have is confidence, and it only took a few sentences from Vicki for that confidence to shatter.

I run my hand down the side of her face. It's turned toward me, her eyes still closed, and her breathing even. The Vicki situation was annoying and uncalled for, but I was able to fix it. But there's another issue that I can't fix. Another issue that I can't control. Bradley. When he had called her, I wanted to take her phone from her and throw it into the ocean. But I refrained from looking like a jealous guy. I'd never ask her who it was on the phone, but I knew it by the way she smiled when she looked down at her phone. I couldn't hear what he was saying to her, but I could hear her end. She told him that New York is where she lives now. I know what he was thinking. I know he misses her. Hell, I missed her after our one weekend, and she's been his for years now.

He loves her.

She won't admit that because she truly believes they can have sex with no emotions. She's crazy if she thinks a man can be with her and not fall for her.

I reach up to run my knuckles down the side of her face again. Her soft skin is warm to my touch. My fingers continue down her jawline to her neck; pushing the covers away, I expose her naked chest to me. She

breathes deeply with her head turned to face me. Her eyes are closed, and she looks absolutely beautiful.

I run my fingers lightly over her soft, pink nipple. I give it a little pinch, and she shifts, letting out a long breath.

I slide my hand across her chest and do the same to the other breast. This time when she shifts, her eyes flutter open. They lock on mine, and I smile down at her. “You’re so gorgeous,” I whisper.

She smiles a soft smile as she closes her eyes. “If you’re gonna wake me up, you’d better make it worth it.” Her voice is a whisper.

I chuckle. “It’s still my birthday.” I look over at my phone and see it’s a quarter till midnight, and I have ten missed calls from my mother. No doubt to ask what the hell happened. I turn it off completely. “I have fifteen more minutes.”

Her eyes remain shut this time. “Your birthday was two weeks ago,” she reminds me. “So I hate to burst your bubble, but that excuse isn’t gonna work.”

I wrap my arm around her side and pull her to me. “Then how about I make this all about you?” My hand comes up and pushes some blond hair from her face. Her eyes remain closed, but she licks her lips.

“You’re getting warmer,” she jokes.

I roll over and open the dark brown drawer. I open the box and take out the gift I got her, leaving the box where she can’t see it. I had done some shopping yesterday on my way out to the port, and she was the only one I was getting a gift for.

I turn back to face her, and she continues to lie there, eyes closed. She must feel me staring because, after a few long seconds, her eyes drift open. She blinks a few times.

I smile. “If you knew how tired I truly am, you would let me sleep,” she groans.

I pick up her left wrist and examine the marks my belt left. I lift them to my lips and gently kiss them. “I didn’t hear you complaining earlier.”

She snorts. “It’s hard to complain when you’re gagged.”

“True,” I say with a smile. I had stuffed her panties in her mouth after I removed my cock. “You liked it.”

A soft smile spreads across her face. “I’ll never say.”

She laughs softly as I sit up and unclasp the bracelet that she doesn’t see me holding. I wrap it around her wrist, and her laughter dies. She sits up in a rush and stares down at it with confusion all over her face.

I push her wild and crazy blond hair from her face, tucking it behind her ear. “Ryder.” She whispers my name. “What is this?” Her eyes look up and meet mine.

“It’s your gift.”

She starts shaking her head. “I don’t need …”

“I know,” I say, pushing her back onto the bed. She looks up at me. “I know you don’t need me to get you anything. But I wanted to,” I tell her, cupping her face. “I wanted to give you something that makes you think of me.”

“I always think of you.” She bites her bottom lip, and her cheeks flush as if she didn’t mean to say that.

I smile down at her. “Don’t be embarrassed, sweetheart. You’re all I think about too.”

ASHLYN

I walk up the stairs in Ryder’s yacht that I’m pretty sure are gold plated and out into the sunlight. I blink a few times until my eyes adjust to the sun. And once they do, I freeze at what I see. Jaycent and Becca stand at the back of the yacht. His hands are in her already messy hair, and his lips are on hers. I shouldn’t be surprised, I know what they’re doing, but still. I’m surprised they are this open with the fact that Ryder could catch them at any moment.

I stand back and watch as if I’m watching a movie play out in front of me. They stand by the rail, the sun beating down on them. The sound of the waves behind the yacht as we head to god knows where. Over to the right

of them are two lawn chairs and a bright red umbrella, covering the chairs in the shade.

They get my attention as he pushes her back into the railing. His hand in her hair falls to her thigh. He lifts it up around his hip …

“Beautiful morning, isn’t it?” I say loud enough for them to hear me. I don’t mind watching random strangers in Panama City, but I can’t watch my best friend and her secret lover go at it on her brother’s yacht.

They pull away quickly, and Becca wipes her lips with the back of her hand. Jaycent coughs as he looks anywhere but at me.

“Becca, I’m gonna see what I can find to cook for breakfast. Wanna help me?”

She just nods as she walks away from Jaycent and right past me. I turn and follow after her because honestly, I don’t know where the kitchen is. We walk through a living area with white leather couches with gold throw pillows and a soft brown throw blanket draped over the back of them. An expensive brown area rug feels good on my bare feet.

We enter a little door that has a circular window, and I hear people talking as we enter what I’m guessing is the kitchen.

I turn a corner and see three women and a man standing around; one lady has her hands in the fridge, another in a cupboard. A guy is turning the stove on.

“Get out,” I say.

They all turn to me, their faces laced with confusion. I point at the door behind me with my thumb. “Get out,” I say. “You’re off for the day.”

They look at Becca for I guess approval. I clap my hands, and they scatter.

I’ve heard Becca talk about his before—the way they grew up. Nannies, chefs, and maids but I never thought much of it. But now that I see it, I don’t care for it.

I open up the stainless fridge, and Becca comes over beside me. She turns, facing the wooden island and leans her back against the counter. Sighing heavily.

“Ballsy,” I say, pulling out a carton of eggs.

“It’s getting harder to hide it.” She sighs.

“No shit.” I refrain from laughing.

“He wants to tell Ryder,” she whispers.

“And you’re not ready?” I grab a bowl out of the white painted cabinet and start breaking eggs on the side of it.

She shakes her head. “Ry will be so pissed.” She takes a deep breath. “But Jaycent keeps bringing it up. Like every second. If I keep putting it off, he may walk away.”

Is that why they were out in the open? Because he wants Ryder to know. “I doubt that,” I say, breaking another egg.

“I don’t wanna hurt, Ry. But Jaycent and I should be able to be together. Jaycent makes it sound like he needs Ry’s blessing,” she huffs.

“Maybe he does.” But letting him catch them out in the open probably isn’t the best way to do that.

“Well, I don’t,” she snaps, and my brows lift. Becca is a softie. She doesn’t raise her voice. She runs a hand through her hair. “I feel like time is running out.” I can hear the desperation in her voice.

“Can you get me the milk, please?” I ask, trying to help ease her frustration.

She nods and pushes off the counter to get into the fridge. I reach out to grab the milk from her, and her hand wraps around her my wrist. I hiss in a breath when she squeezes the sensitive skin where Ryder had secured his belt. She eases up and looks at the reddened marks for a few seconds. She looks up at me, and I smile. “What?”

She shakes her head and lowers her eyes. If she were to ask about me and Ryder’s sex life, I would tell her, but I’m positive that’s a conversation we’ll never have. “When did you get this?” she asks, still looking down at my wrist.

“Last night.”

“The bracelet,” she says as if she needs to clarify.

“Last night,” I repeat.

She releases my wrist, and I smile, looking down at the bracelet he got me. It’s exactly me. It’s a sterling silver charm bracelet with a heart tag in

the middle. The charm to the left of the heart tag is a circular charm with the letter *A* scripted on it. On the opposite side of the heart tag is another circular charm with the letter *R* scripted on it. I look over the other silver charms. There's an open book. Because *I love to read,* he says. Another is a crown because he says, *you're my queen*.

"It's beautiful," Becca says.

"I agree."

"But then again, everything from Tiffany's is."

My hand drops, and I look at her. "Tiffany's?" She nods. "*The* Tiffany's and Company?"

She nods slowly. "Yes." I start shaking my head. She reaches down, grabs my wrists, and spins the bracelet to where the heart is. She flips it over and there in small letters it reads *Tiffany & Co.*

"He didn't tell me where it came from," I say with a growl. "He knows how I feel about the money—"

"Ashlyn." She interrupts me, placing her hand on my arm. "I want to tell you something, but I don't want you to think I'm taking his side."

My brow rises. "His side?"

"You have to understand where Ry and I came from. Our parents were never around. My father means well, and well, my mother just wants everyone to see her." She frowns as if she can't understand that. "Ry doesn't understand how to show someone he cares about them."

"Becca."

"Just wait. I learned a lot from you and your parents over the last four years. I realized what love looks like. I understand when someone said a hug can change your entire day. But Ry still doesn't know what that's like. He's like my father. Money saves the day. He may have bought you that bracelet, but I know he bought it with the purest intentions."

"What are you saying?" I ask, running my hands over the crown. *My queen.*

"I'm saying don't be mad at him for doing the only thing he knows."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

RYDER

My eyes open, and I reach out to where Ashlyn should be but feel nothing but empty space. I look over to my right to see I'm alone. I fall back onto the bed, reminiscing about what I did to her last night.

I roll over onto my side and moan at the feel of my hard cock. It's sore from what we did. The roughness how I took her. And I wanna do it again.

"Ashlyn?" I mumble her name. When she doesn't answer, I know she's no longer in the bedroom with me.

I kick off the covers and get up. I'm gonna have to take care of this before I go walking around to look for her.

Fifteen minutes later, I make my way up the steps. The sun blinds me, so I slip on my sunglasses. I see Jaycent first, standing at the back of the boat overlooking the water. "Good morning."

"Morning," he says, running a hand through his hair. His eyes stay on the deck, and he shuffles from foot to foot.

"Everything okay?" I ask already knowing it isn't.

He places his hands in the front pockets of his shorts. "I need to talk to you," he says slowly.

"Okay," I say crossing my arms over my chest. What could this possibly be about?

He goes to open his mouth, but a female voice cuts him off. "Ry."

I look over to see my sister coming towards me. She has a smile on her face, but it drops off the moment she looks at Jaycent.

"Where's Ashlyn?" I ask when I don't see she is with my sister.

"In the kitchen cooking breakfast."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because she wanted to," comes her simple answer.

I leave them alone on the deck and make my way down to the kitchen, lifting my sunglasses once I'm out of the sun.

I find her standing in the kitchen cooking bacon over the stove. "I pay people to do that, you know?" I say, leaning against the counter.

She spins around, and her eyes narrow on me. I straighten my back. "What?"

She holds up her wrist, and I exhale. *She knows.* "You thought I wouldn't see it?"

"I hoped so," I say honestly.

She huffs. "Ryder, I don't want you buying me things."

"Too bad," I say, and she huffs. I smile and walk to her. "There's a lot of things I won't do, but one thing I will do is spend my money how I see fit. And I want to spend it on you."

Her shoulders fall. "It's not that I don't love it, but I can't compete with that."

"It's not a competition," I say softly.

She wraps her arms around my neck, and I push her back into the counter. "My bacon is gonna burn."

"Let it," I tell her.

I place my hands on the counter caging her in. "I don't want you to buy me anything. All I want is you." Her eyes search mine as if she's trying to determine if I'm lying or being serious. "I'm serious," I tell her. "You. Me. That's what I want."

She finally smiles.

***

The girls left the boat much earlier than I did. Rohnny came and picked them up, and I had Milton take me up to the office needing to go over some paperwork. I spent most of my day there, and I very rarely checked my phone, still trying to avoid my mother. I know she's not gonna go away, but the less I have to hear from her the better.

I walk into my apartment and go straight to my room. I remove my shirt, kick off my shoes, and fall onto my bed. I send Ashlyn a quick message that I'm back home and to come up to my place.

I lay my phone on my chest, waiting for her to respond or knock on my door, and close my eyes.

I wake to the sound of thunder rattling my floor-to-ceiling windows. I frown at the how dark my room now is. Sitting up, I yawn and grab my phone as it falls off my chest and into my lap. The clock on my phone reads a little after nine p.m. I have been sleeping for three hours. The thunder booms again, and then my room is lit up by lightning.

I pull up my messages, and Ashlyn hasn't even read the text I sent her three hours ago. I throw the covers off and walk to my closet. I throw on a t-shirt and a fresh pair of blue plaid shorts and decide to just go down to her apartment and get her.

I make my way down to her apartment and let myself in; my sister gave me a key, so I don't see why I can't use it.

I walk in and come to a quick stop when I see my sister in the kitchen with a shirtless man. "Hello?" I question as I look him up and down.

Becca's eyes widen when she sees me. "Ryder," she squeaks in surprise. Then her eyes dart to the hallway.

"Sis," I say, looking back at the man. Is my sister dating someone that I don't know about? "I'm Ryder," I say taking a step closer to him. "Becca's brother," I declare as I reach out my hand.

"Oh, hey man," he says happily as he places his hand in mine. "Nice to meet you. I'm …"

"Hey babe," He's interrupted by a voice I know all too well. "What do you want to do tonight?"

I turn and look at the hallway just as Ashlyn emerges. She comes to a halt when she sees me standing in the kitchen. I remove my hand from the man's as I turn to fully face her. My eyes look her up and down trying to process why she is wearing a man's oversize t-shirt and nothing else.

Who was she talking to? She didn't know I was here.

"It's whatever you wanna do," the shirtless man says, and I look at him.

“Babe?” I say, looking back at her.

Her blue eyes widen, and she swallows. “Uh, Ryder. What are you doing here?” she asks, ignoring my question.

“I came down because you ignored my text message,” I say. I’m still trying to figure out what is going on, but I already know I’m not gonna like it.

My eyes go to her bare legs, and as they do, she tugs at her t-shirt that barely covers her fucking pussy. My mind is telling me that she is dressed that way because of the man in her kitchen, but every ounce of me wants to say that’s not true. It can’t be. Can it?

“I’m sorry, my phone is off,” she says in a rush.

“You’d better keep it off for the next three days, princess,” the man in the kitchen says before he takes a bite out of an apple.

Ashlyn’s eyes go to him and then back to me. Her chest rises and falls as she takes a deep breath. I turn to face the man, my jaw tightening and my chest pounding. “I’m sorry, but who are you?” I demand.

His smile fades, and he frowns at the change of my voice. “I’m Bradley,” he says his name as if I should know who he is, and I hate that I do.

My jaw tightens, and my hands fist down by my side as I look back at her. I shouldn’t feel this way over a woman I’ve been fucking for three weeks now and only had one date with. I have no right to her just as he has no right to her. *But he does.* He’s got years of her time over me. This is her best fucking friend. I, on the other hand, am just some guy she doesn’t want to know. She just wants to fuck me, and that’s all. Any man should feel grateful for at least that from her, but I don’t. It just pisses me off. I want more, and I’ve told her this. Yet here I am, her backup. If he lived here, she’d never look at me twice.

I feel sweat bead on the back of my neck, and my chest tightens to the point it’s hard to breathe as I look at her bare legs. An image enters my mind, and I try to fight it, but it consumes me.

She’s naked in her bed. He’s on top of her, her legs wrapped around his waist. His hands gripping her thigh. Her head thrown back as she moans.

“Bradley …” Her mouth falls open, and she grips his biceps as he thrusts into her…

My body heats up with jealousy. Hot fucking rage. I refuse to share her. I meet her beautiful blue eyes, and I see the concern in them. She takes a step to me. “Ryder …” Her voice breaks, and I swallow the lump in my throat. She takes another step, and I try to move back, but my legs have become anchors. She’s pulling me down. I never had a chance. I should have never touched her in Florida. That was my first mistake. The second was thinking that I had a chance with her.

I’ve known it since I met her that she was like a storm. Catastrophic and beautiful all at once. It was as if her purpose was solely vengeance. And like every storm, most underestimated her will to destroy. But I didn’t. I knew what she was capable of, yet I still walked right into it ready to dance in the rain. I wanted to know what her wrath would feel like. Now, I know, and it’s devastating.

Without another word, I will my legs to move, turn around and leave, slamming the door behind me.

ASHLYN

Shit! Shit! Shit!

I stand there frozen to my spot, trying to process what just happened and why I feel so bad about it. What Ryder and I are doing is just sex. We both know that. But he looked so pissed. Or was it heartbroken? Maybe that’s wishful thinking. I feel so shitty.

“What’s wrong with him?” Bradley asks, taking another bite out of his apple, and it interrupts my thinking.

I spin around and run to my bedroom. My heart is beating hard in my chest, and my breathing is heavy. I yank on a pair of sweatpants that sit on the end of my bed and slide on a pair of flip-flops from my closet. I run through the apartment and out the front door without explaining to anyone what I’m doing.

I run into the hallway just as the doors start to close to the elevator. “Ryder!” I yell out as I see him.

His dark green eyes slowly look up at me from his phone and my heart stops. The anger behind them knocks me in the chest. His lips are in a thin line, and his body is tight. I did this to him. I’ve hurt him. I never meant for this to happen. He looks back down at his phone, dismissing me, and I suck in a deep breath as if I can finally breathe again. “Wait,” I call out as I run to the elevator. He makes no attempt to stop the doors from shutting, but I manage to jump in just as they close.

“Ryder, please. Let me explain,” I say, trying to catch my breath.

“What’s there to explain?” he asks flatly as he pockets his phone and looks up to count the floors as we fall.

I suck in another deep breath. “I didn’t—”

“You know; it doesn’t matter what you have to say,” he interrupts me. “I get it.”

“You don’t,” I say defensively. Why do I feel like shit? Why do I feel like Bradley coming here was a mistake? I know why! It’s because I have fallen for Ryder. I go to open my mouth to tell him that, but I don’t get the chance.

“Save it,” he says, still refusing to look at me. “I get it, Ashlyn. He’s your best friend. That you fuck.” I cringe. He makes it sound so dirty.

Just tell him! I swallow the lump that’s in my throat. “He is my best friend, but …”

“You guys are different.” He throws my words back at me. “You’ve said that.” He nods once still unable to look at me.

I can feel the heat radiating off him, and I reach up to touch him. I feel his body tense under my hand, and I just want to hug him. Kiss him. Tell him he’s the one I want, but would he understand? What he saw and what I say are two very different things.

The elevator dings and the mirrored doors slide open. My chest tightens. I’m running out of time. I follow him out, looking like I just crawled out of bed while he is dressed casually and still the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen. I follow him through the lobby, trying to think of what to say. How to

explain myself when I'm not even sure what is going on or how to process it.

As we come up to the doors, I get desperate. I reach out and grab his arm and yank him to a stop. His muscles tense beneath my hand. He spins around, and his dark green eyes harden as they look down into mine. "Why are you down here, Ashlyn?" he snaps, and his voice echoes through the lobby.

I cringe at the force behind his voice. "I want to apologize." *For what?* I did nothing wrong. But didn't I? It feels wrong. So, so wrong.

He yanks his arm out of my hold. "No need to apologize for who you are." *Ouch!*

I wrap my arms around myself, feeling cold. I want his warm hands on me. I want him to reach up and touch my cheek like he always does. "What does that mean?" I whisper as my throat closes on me.

I search his face for any sign of hope. He smashes it with just three words.

"Just a fuck!" he states carelessly, turns around, and walks out the glass double doors.

I stand there, hugging myself as I watch him pull out his phone while walking down the stairs of the building. Tears threaten my eyes and I try to even my breathing to slow my heart rate. I stand there for I don't know how long as people watch me. But I don't care about them. All I care about is Ryder. I'm not that girl. The girl who cheats. The girl who plays men. I make myself very clear what I want and what I'm willing to give, but Ryder was different. *Is* different. He makes me feel something that no other man has ever made me feel.

I swallow the lump in my throat as I watch his black SUV pull up to the curb, and he climbs in, not even bothering to look back. Lightning fills the dark night and then I hear thunder in the distance as the Escalade drives off.

I drop my head, turn around, and make my way back to my apartment with my mind running a million different directions. I'm pissed; at him, at myself, and at Bradley. But it doesn't matter how I spin it, it's my fault. I got involved with Ryder. I should have never slept with him again after I

found out he was Becca's brother. But the sex was just too good to pass up. And then the picnic he set up. Then our night on his boat. It's all just too much. And every fucking day we have spent together. Every one of them means something to me.

I step off the elevator and into our apartment. Becca and Bradley still stand in the kitchen, but now, Jaycent has joined them. Thank God, Ryder didn't see him getting dressed in Becca's room. That would have been an entirely different shit storm.

"What was that about?" Bradley asks as his brown eyes narrow just a bit.

Jaycent and Becca start to pretend there's something interesting to look at on the ceiling.

"I don't wanna talk about it," I mumble as I make my way back to the bedroom. I want a hot shower and then a cup of coffee. Maybe I'll add some Kahlua to it. It's Sunday, after all.

I walk into my bedroom and shut the door. It opens immediately as Bradley enters behind me. "Well, I wanna talk about it," he states.

Harry meows as he jumps onto my bed and plops down on my pillow in his black and white sweater my grandmother made him. "Not now," I say, not bothering to turn around and look at him.

"Yes, now," he says, and I can hear it in his voice that he's getting pissed. That he thinks I'm hiding something from him.

I spin around and face him. "Why does it matter?" I snap. The man I want to talk to is ignoring me. The one I don't want to talk to me won't let it go.

"Because that man just acted like you belonged to him, and he didn't like the fact that you were half dressed and called me babe," he snaps back. I sigh and run a hand through my hair. "Have you been fucking him, Ashlyn?" he demands, coming right out and asking.

I feel my stomach drop. Just the way he asks makes me feel like I've betrayed him, but I haven't. We aren't exclusive. He's just my friend. "Yes," I say honestly. I've never been known as I liar.

He stands there, his dark brown eyes staring down at me. They look at me with disgust and anger. "When?"

“When what?”

“When did you first sleep with him?” he shouts, fisting his hands down by his side.

“In Panama City,” I whisper.

He turns giving me his back and runs a hand through his blond hair. “I can’t believe this,” he hisses.

“And why not?” I snap. Bradley has never acted this way before towards me. “What’s so wrong with me sleeping with him?” I ask, my voice rising.

“Why not?” he growls, turning back to face me. “That is Becca’s brother.”

“I didn’t know that.” *Then.*

“So you’re saying that you stopped sleeping with him after you found out who he was?” he asks, his eyes looking me up and down once and his lip pulling back in disgust.

I bite my bottom lip, and he laughs out loud as if I’m crazy. “Unbelievable,” he mutters.

“Are you judging me?” I demand. “Because you slept with a woman that same weekend.”

His eyes widen as he stares down at me, and he lets out a long sigh. “Are you that fucking blind?”

“Excuse me?” I snap.

He takes a step toward me and places his hands on either side of my face. They’re cold, and nothing like what Ryder’s feel like when he touches me. “I’m not judging you,” he says, his voice softening.

“Then what are you doing?”

His brown eyes soften, and his shoulders slump. “Come back to Seattle,” he says, changing the subject.

I pull away from him. “Will you stop with Seattle? I live here now, Bradley,” I growl.

“But I don’t,” he states.

“What is your point?” I snap, wanting to get this over with. My head is pounding. My chest hurting.

“My point is haven’t you ever missed something so bad that you can’t eat or sleep?” I do, but it’s not him. It’s for the man who just walked away from me. “Because I can’t, princess.” He reaches up and runs the back of his knuckles over my cheek. They feel foreign. At one time, they would have made me weak in the knees, but they’re not Ryder’s soft, warm hands. “I miss you, babe. So much. That I can’t live another day without you with me.”

“Bradley,” I whisper, still trying to understand what is going on here. We don’t talk this way. We joke with one another. We fuck. That’s what we do.

He lowers his lips down to mine, and before they touch, he whispers against them. “I love you, Ashlyn. I love you more than another man possibly could. I’m begging you to come home with me and let me prove it to you.”

I stare up at him, wide-eyed and my heart racing. *I love you*? We say I love you but not like that. Not like we can’t live without the other.

I don’t have butterflies in my stomach or goose bumps from the result of excitement like people explain how love feels. Instead, I’m breathing heavy, and my heart is pounding because I realize what just happened. I just lost my best friend.

“Why, Bradley?” I ask as I pull away from him.

His hand drops to his side, and he swallows nervously. Because he knows too. “Why what?”

“Why did you say that?” I ask, my voice shaking.

“How can you not?” he counters. “We’ve been best friends for three years, Ashlyn.”

“Yes. Friends,” I say as I feel my body start to shake to match my voice.

“Are you saying after three years, that’s all you see me as?” he asks, tilting his head to the side.

“Yes, Bradley,” I say truthfully and take a step to him. I grab his right hand and squeeze it. “You’re my best friend, and I don’t plan on us being anything else.”

He gently pulls his hand from mine as he nods his head. He can’t look me in the eyes now. “I see.” He turns around, giving me his back. Bending

down, he picks up his still packed bags off my bedroom floor and walks out of my room.

“Bradley?” I call out as I follow after him through the apartment. I pay little attention to Jaycent and Becca making out in the kitchen. “Where are you going?” I can’t help but ask him even though I already know.

He comes to a stop at the door and grabs the handle before he turns his body to look at me. His brows pull together, and I see the sadness in his eyes. “I just told you that I love you, and you tell me that I’m just your friend and you ask where I’m going,” he says it slowly as if he’s trying to understand what is happening too.

I swallow. “Bradley. I don’t wanna lose you,” I say truthfully.

He looks away from me, and his jaw sharpens as if I’m being selfish and wanting too much. “And I didn’t wanna just be your friend. But we can’t all get what we want.” Then he turns around and walks out, shutting the door softly behind him.

I stand there, once again trying to figure out what is happening. How two men just left me.

“That was awkward,” I hear Jaycent mumble before Becca rams her elbow into his stomach, making him cough.

I turn around, letting out a long breath and walking to my bedroom. Screw the coffee. I want a bath, and then I wanna sleep. This day has got to end. I enter my room and shut the door, leaning my body against it. I let out a long breath, blowing loose strands of my blond hair around. “How did this happen?” I ask myself.

Where did I mess up? How did I …?

“Ashlyn?” I hear Becca’s soft voice and then a knock on my door.

I quickly wipe my eyes; the tears haven’t fallen yet, but they’re threatening to. I turn and open the door. I look into her dark green eyes, and they remind me of Ryder’s. My chest tightens at the way they would look at me. Like I was the only woman in the room. “May I come in?” she asks.

I step out of the way and open the door all the way for her. She sits on the end of my messy bed, and I shut the door. I stay where I’m at. “Are you okay?”

I think about that question. *Am I okay?* No, I'm not. I just lost one of my best friends and a man that … I was falling for? "I'm confused," I admit softly.

"What happened?" she asks.

I look down at Ryder's shirt that I'm wearing and sigh. "I don't know. I tried to explain to Ryder that nothing happened between Bradley and me, but he wouldn't even hear it." Bradley showed up with Harry this afternoon after we got back from the yacht, and we passed out. He slept in the bed with me but nothing happened. We didn't even kiss.

"You hurt him," she says simply.

"Well, I'm hurt too," I snap.

She frowns. "Over Ryder or Bradley?"

"Both," I admit. "Bradley was supposed to be my best friend. We never had rules. We had an understanding. And Ryder … We broke every rule we made."

She smiles and places her hands in her lap. "I can talk to him for you."

I shake my head. "Don't bother." Her smile falls at my words. "He made his decision. Just like I made mine with Bradley. They're both gone," I say, my throat closing on me.

"Stop!" she demands. "Stop talking like what you and Bradley had is the same thing that you have with my brother."

"I know it was different," I all but shout.

"Is," she corrects me. "Quit talking like it's over."

"He left." Just saying the words out loud has the first tear dropping and my throat tightening. "He walked out."

"Go and chase him."

"I did that." More tears fall. "Ryder didn't wanna listen," I yell.

"Why are you yelling at me?" she demands.

I run a hand through my hair, my shoulders slumping in defeat and suck in a ragged breath. "I'm sorry," My voice is barely a whisper.

"Don't be sorry," she says softly.

"I …. I just want to be alone." I gulp trying to clear the tightness in my throat.

She gets up, walks over to me, pulling me into a hug and I sniff. “Just know that I’m here if you need to talk.”

I nod. “Thank you.” Then walk into my bathroom, shutting the door behind me and draw a bath. Removing Ryder’s shirt, I toss it onto the floor in frustration. I saw the hurt in his eyes as he looked at me, he didn’t even realize it was his shirt from Panama. I grab my phone off the countertop, turning it on in the hopes of explaining myself. If he doesn’t want to talk to me at least I can make him understand with a text.

Once it comes on I hear the instant ding notifying me I have a message. My heart beats faster and I smile realizing it’s from Ryder. As my eyes scan over it, my heart instantly shatters.

Ryder: *Come lay in bed with me.*

That was the message he was talking about. That’s what he sent me before he found out Bradley was here. My chest tightens. *How could I be so stupid?* Remembering what he told me that I was, *just a fuck!* Why were we both trying so hard for more? Why didn’t I leave it at that? This is the exact reason why I never wanted to do this with him. I didn’t want to cause someone pain. And if I’m being completely honest with myself, I never wanted to feel this way either.

My chest feels like a vice grip is squeezing it to pieces now that I know nothing I say will make a difference.

Just a fuck!

His words stung. Whether or not they were true, I thought we had become more than that. So for him to throw those words at me, hurt more than I thought it could. No matter how much I wanted to push away from him, he had refused to let me. He had torn down all of the walls that I hadn’t realized were there. Looking down, I see the bracelet he gave me just last night and remove it quickly. Not wanting the reminder of how special and priceless he made me feel. Placing it on the side of the tub, the tears continue to flow down my cheeks. Trying to swallow the lump in my throat but it just grows to the point where I can’t breathe.

I close my eyes, placing my hand on my chest. Sucking in a ragged breath, a sob threatens to break free. My eyes tighten as the tears fall faster and I lower myself into the water needing to wash them away. If no one sees them, then they aren't real. I never wanted to be this girl, the one wrapped up in a man or cause drama. It all changed when I found Ryder; my Romeo. And what I thought was a love story, really is a tragedy after all.

I just wanna disappear.

Gasping for air, my body sinks deeper into the water and over my head. I no longer want to exist.

Maybe you can't have it all…

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shantel is a Texas-born girl who now lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma with her high school sweetheart, who is a wonderful, supportive husband and their five-year-old little princess. She loves to spend time cuddled up on the couch with a good book.

She is the Amazon Bestselling author of the Undescribable series and is currently working on her fourth book Unforgettable, which is set to release September 23rd. She considers herself extremely lucky to get to be a stay at home wife and mother. Going to concerts and the movies are just a few of her favorite things to do. She hates coffee but loves wine. She and her husband are both huge football fans, college and NFL. And she has to feed her high heel addiction by shopping for shoes weekly.

Although she has a passion for writing, her family is most important to her. She loves spending evenings at home with her husband and daughter, along with their cat and dog.

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